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# Civic Engagement in the Cyberspace Era: A Study of a Local Cybergroup

Gay Henry Lyons

*University of Tennessee - Knoxville*

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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Gay Henry Lyons entitled "Civic Engagement in the Cyberspace Era: A Study of a Local Cybergroup." I have examined the final electronic copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with a major in Political Science.

Dr. Michael R. Fitzgerald, Major Professor

We have read this dissertation and recommend its acceptance:

Dr. John M. Scheb, Dr. David Folz, Dr. Bob Gorman, Dr. Grady Bogue

Accepted for the Council:

Dixie L. Thompson

Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

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and recommend its acceptance:

Dr. John M. Scheb

Dr. David Folz

Dr. Bob Gorman

Dr. Grady Bogue

Acceptance for the Council:

Dr. Anne Mayhew  
Vice Provost and Dean of Graduate Studies

(Original signatures are on file in the Graduate Student Services Office.)

**CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IN THE CYBERSPACE ERA:  
A STUDY OF A LOCAL CYBERGROUP**

A Dissertation  
Presented for the  
Doctor of Philosophy  
Degree  
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Gay Henry Lyons  
May 2002

## **DEDICATION**

This dissertation is dedicated to  
my husband William Lyons  
and to  
my daughter Liz Lyons.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

First of all, I wish to thank my major professor Dr. Michael R. Fitzgerald for his tremendous assistance with this dissertation. From beginning to end, he has been a steadfast source of information, ideas, support, and energy. I will be forever grateful for his confidence that this work could be completed and for his real dedication to the project. He has proved a true mentor and friend.

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## **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this study was to explore the issue of participation and civic engagement through the investigation of cyberspace as public space. The research systematically studied the development, nature, operation, and impact of k2k, a local cybergroup based in Knoxville, Tennessee. While the emergence of cyberspace as public space is no panacea for the ills of democracy in America, it is clearly a potential antidote to counter the more virulent dimensions of civic disengagement in the United States. However, for a cybergroup to serve as an antidote to civic disengagement, the participants must move beyond electronic discourse into the realm of action. This study found that as people participated in the cybergroup, they became more informed from the interaction with others and were motivated to bring more information to the group. This increased the knowledge of others in the group as well as the group's overall perception of efficacy within the community. As more people participated and disseminated both knowledge and strategy for community action, the greater community itself was affected. As a result, more people participated: passive participants tended to participate more actively, and active participants were more likely to increase their participation. Finally, this study considers the implications of the findings and proposes areas for further study.

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## **Chapter 1: Civic Disengagement and Cyberspace**

### **Introduction**

The nature and level of political participation in a democratic polity have long concerned scholars. Of particular moment has been the relationship between civic engagement and the health of the political community and the well-being of citizens within it. In the United States especially, a trend toward civic disengagement—its degree, causes, and consequences—is drawing renewed and sustained attention. This study explores the issue of participation and civic engagement through the investigation of cyberspace as public space. That is, the new technology of the world wide web creates a new arena of potential citizen discourse, association, and participation in public affairs—a new public space as it were. This research intensively and systematically explores the development, nature, operation, and impact of a local cybergroup over time. In so doing, it provides a basis upon which an assessment of this “new” form of citizen activity can begin. Further, it provides a basis for future extended, comparative research into the critical issue of the degree to which “cyber-participation” and “cyberassociations” might well provide an antidote to civic disengagement in the United States.

### **Political Participation and the Polity**

In his *Politics* Aristotle conceives of political participation as an end in itself, with the individual realizing his potential through active participation in a political community. Most people in contemporary society view political participation as a means to other goals (Huntington and Nelson 1976). However,

rather than being strictly instrumental in an essentially selfish way, participation is also understood to have both intrinsic and transformative value (Nagel 1987). Participation "feels good" and is a way for citizens to gain the knowledge, skills, and understanding that may lead to a greater sense of political efficacy and to a stronger degree of trust in government. In a self-governing society, citizen participation is at the core of the relationship between citizens and their government (Kweit and Kweit 1981). Oliver (1999) notes that diminished participation is essentially a diminishment of citizenship.

Citizens of the United States have various opportunities for civic participation. Conventional participation in politics, in addition to voting, includes working in campaigns, donating money to candidates, contacting government officials, circulating petitions, and running for office. Studies of participation have focused not only on the types of activities but also on the amount of participation as measured by numbers of hours spent or number of dollars spent. (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995; Verba and Nie 1972). Verba, Nie, and Kim (1971) studied 12 acts of political participation, which they classify as four modes of participation: voting, campaign activity, communal activity, and particularized contacts. Barnes and Kaase (1979) rank nine forms of conventional political participation along a continuum from high initiative to low initiative behavior. Campaigning for candidates and attending political meetings are high initiative activities; voting in elections and reading about politics in newspapers are low initiative activities. Milbrath (1965) conceptualizes political participation as a hierarchy ranging from a very high level of involvement such as running for office

to an apathetic level of complete non-participation. The “gladiator” activities at the top of the hierarchy are conceived as “higher cost” activities whereas the “spectator” activities at the bottom of the hierarchy are “lower cost” activities. A middle range, designated “transition” activities, includes contacting officials, attending meetings, and making political contributions. Political discussion is classified as a “spectator” activity. Presented in Figure 1.1 (See Appendix A for all figures) is “Milbrath’s Hierarchy of Political Involvement.” Milbrath asserts that the activities listed are cumulative so that those who participate in a given activity are likely to participate also in all those activities below it on the hierarchy. Only a small number of citizens engage in any activity other than voting, and voting appears to be the predictor of other more active forms of participation.

Voting is placed fairly low on Milbrath’s hierarchy, but as the means by which citizens select their representatives, the act of voting may be the most basic form of civic participation. However, many citizens do not participate in this basic civic act. Voter turnout in the United States began slipping in the twentieth century and has been going down steadily for the last three decades. Since 1912, only about 55-65 percent of eligible citizens have voted in presidential elections, the elections with the largest turnout. In off-year congressional elections, rates have dropped to between 30-40 percent with even lower turnouts of 10-20 percent in local elections. While a number of explanations have been offered for this decline, the most recent explanations account for low voter turnout in terms of the decreased social and political connectedness of American citizens (Miller and Shanks 1996, Teixeira 1992, Gant and Luttbeg 1991,

Campbell et al. 1960). Because the act of voting offers little reward in a strict cost/benefit analysis, most voters participate out of a sense of civic duty. The decline in voter turnout is related to a decline in feelings of civic duty and civic engagement.

Milbrath's model of political involvement is heavily oriented toward campaigns and elections, neglecting in large part other forms of civic association. This unfortunately limits its utility for this study, but it does provide a basic framework, which is adapted in Chapter Two, with which to frame the inquiry.

### **Groups: The Associational Dimension of Civic Engagement**

Another form of participation in civic life is through membership in associations of various kinds. According to Verba and Nie (1972), more Americans say they find participation in their communities to be more rewarding than the act of voting. Olson (1965) asserts that people are more likely to participate in small groups than in large groups. Visiting the United States in the early 1830's, Alexis de Tocqueville observed the propensity of Americans to form associations, particularly voluntary civic associations. According to Tocqueville, associations provide an antidote to the problems associated with individualism because they result in collective action. According to Putnam ("Interview with Robert Putnam" in online *Journal of Democracy*), interacting within associations helps in the development of what Tocqueville called "habits of the heart." According to Putnam, associations provide the opportunity to develop the virtues and skills of democratic citizenship. Associations aid in the development of trust and cooperation, elements in what has been termed "social capital" (Coleman

1990, Bourdieu 1983). Berger and Neuhaus (1977) argue that associations perform the essential function of “mediating” between private and public life and between an individual and institutions. Thus, Putnam’s assertion in *Bowling Alone* (2000) that membership in many types of groups has declined in the last 30 years comes as further evidence of civic disengagement. The conceptual framework of participation offered in Chapter Two will accommodate the forms of civic engagement discussed here.

While cataloguing a number of different types of associations that have experienced declining membership, Putnam lists several forms of engagement that have resisted the trend towards disengagement including talk radio and “mailing list” associations. However, according to Putnam, most of these venues, while “politically significant,” place participants in the role of “disgruntled claimants” rather than as citizens. In addition, since the most important form of participation for most members in a national mass membership organization consists of paying dues, reading a newsletter, and visiting an organization’s website, these associations do not convey the same benefit of “social connectedness” as bowling leagues or community-based associations. A member of an organization such as Greenpeace may feel a sense of satisfaction at having contributed funds toward advancing that organization’s goals, but he or she likely does not feel connected to other members of the organization in any significant way.



## **The Ailing Polity: Civic Disengagement in America**

American citizens at the beginning of the twenty-first century are described as “passive and disengaged” (*A Nation of Spectators*, 1998). Evidence of civic disengagement is found in the decline in voting, the decline in political trust, the decline in political knowledge, and the decline in grassroots political activism. A number of different measures indicate that American civic participation has decreased dramatically in the last twenty to thirty years. These declines are attributed to disengagement and disconnection from social and civic life. Ironically, these declines have occurred during a period when we have the means to connect with each other in more ways than ever before and during a period when educational attainment, an important predictor of participation (Milbrath 1965, Campbell et al 1960, Lane 1959), is higher than ever before. Studies also show a positive correlation between a higher sense of political efficacy and a higher level of participation (Almond and Verba 1963, Campbell et al. 1960). Bennet (2000) and Keiser (2000) note that young people have lower levels of participation than those who are over 35. Some studies indicate a gender gap in levels of participation (Verba et al. 1997, Schlozman et al. 1994, Welch 1977), but Anderson (1975) finds that levels of participation for working women are the same as the levels for men. Putnam (2001) and Volgy and Schwartz (1984) find a connection between television and lower levels of participation. Putnam asserts that television is responsible for one-third of the decline in civic participation; Volgy and Schwartz find that watching television not

only decreases participation but causes people to misperceive their levels of participation as higher than they are.

Scholars have offered a number of explanations for the decline in civic engagement. The reforms of the Progressive era and the policies and programs of the New Deal may have played a role (Galston and Levine 1997). Public affairs have come to be managed not by average citizens but by experts (Joyce and Schambra 1995). With the creation of large institutions where professional agents are employed to serve citizens/clients, individuals tend to grow increasingly distant from their government. The neutrality which replaced corrupt cronyism also depersonalized civic activity. Centralized power structures have moved decisions and opportunities for participation away from local communities. This removal has created a feeling of distance between the governors and the governed. Political parties, once a key vehicle of political socialization and participation, have declined in influence. Putnam (2000) points to a number of societal explanations for civic decline such as increased mobility, the movement of women into the workforce, suburbanization, the growth of the welfare state, and television. Increasingly, it seems, American citizens have become distanced from not only their government but from each other. As we move from one community to another, as we have less time and opportunity to associate, and as other things distract us and direct us inward, we become more disengaged from meaningful civic life. According to Etzioni (1993), whereas at first this loss of community was regarded as "liberating," society has suffered because nothing meaningful has replaced the functions served by community. Many in society

have expressed concern about the loss of “social connectedness” in American society and have called for a renewal of civic spirit. A number of commissions, leagues, and task forces have been created to address these issues. Among the many groups are the Commission on Civic Renewal and the Center for Democracy and Citizenship.

The purpose of the National Commission on Civic Renewal, as stated in its report, *A Nation of Spectators*, is to assess civic engagement in the United States and to propose recommendations for improving civic life.

Recommendations include strengthening civic education in public school, implementing policies which encourage two-parent families, strengthening faith-based institutions, and fostering media accountability. To those ends, the Commission identifies four ongoing projects: The Civic Monitoring Project, The Civic Education Project, The Entertainment Media Project, and the Community News Compact Project. Throughout the report the Commission stresses “empowering citizens” and, in one very specific recommendation, it encourages every citizen to join at least one community association. According to the report, “democracy is neither a consumer good nor a spectator sport, but rather the work of free citizens engaged in shared civic enterprises” (p.8) The Commission’s definition of shared civic enterprises is very traditional. While the report mentions “stirrings of new citizen movements” (p.9), there is no mention of the role the Internet might play in these new movements. Also, while the Commission operates a website and uses the Internet as a tool for the dissemination of

information, its members appear to have overlooked completely the role the Internet might play in engaging citizens and in increasing civic participation.

The Center for Democracy and Citizenship launched itself with a “Civic Declaration” signed by civic leaders from across the United States. At its website ([www.hhh.umn.edu/centers/cdc](http://www.hhh.umn.edu/centers/cdc)), this group stresses the importance of collaborative problem solving, deliberative discussion, and grassroots activism. The group lists three features of a “rich public life”: commitment to individuals and communities, emphasis on deliberative public talk, and focus on practical problem solving. In addition, the group speaks of citizens “reclaiming” a vital role in civic affairs. The declaration briefly mentions the possibility of designing computer and telecommunications systems to strengthen community networks and empower citizens, but it does not include any specific recommendations, and there is no mention of the use of technology in any of the eight “functions” it lists for the Center. Instead the list emphasizes the things government agencies can do to foster civic renewal. As with the Commission, the Center appears to have discovered how it may use the Internet as a tool for disseminating information, but it fails to consider whether the Internet may play a role in increasing civic engagement and participation.

Traditionally we have conceived of political participation as defined earlier in this chapter. Oliver (1999) classifies four types of membership in voluntary associations as a form of political participation, but because political participation tends to be defined as electing and influencing officials, other activities are too often excluded (Salisbury 1975). In writing about cross-national studies of

participation, Schwartz (1984) speaks of the need for broader, more interpretive measures of participation. Nagel (1987) notes that for some, following political events and forming opinions is a form of political participation. While these rather passive forms of participation tend to be dismissed as less valuable than more active forms of participation, Schudson (2000) asserts that we need to reconsider our definition of the *ideal* citizen and to recognize new forms of knowledge and action. He writes that people are "reinventing citizenship" in various ways, which means they are redefining citizen participation. Vigoda and Golembiewski (2001) discuss the need to develop multi-dimensional models of citizen involvement. In noting that we need to develop alternative ways of conceptualizing participation, Salisbury (1975) describes political participation as a field in need of further study.

### **Cyberspace as Public Space: New Forms of Participation**

The recommendations of the Commission for Civic Renewal and the Center for Democracy and Citizenship reveal a bias towards political participation as it has traditionally been defined. Another forum for civic engagement has emerged more recently. The world wide web makes possible the formation of groups which develop and exist solely in a web-based form. This is a form of political participation that has been overlooked by the Commission and by the Center. In fact, these groups have only recently begun to attract the attention of scholars. Most of the literature on the topic is anecdotal and speculative. Little actual study has been done.

The seminal online group is the WELL (Whole Earth 'Lectric Link), a Southern California group, founded in 1985, written about extensively by its founder Howard Rheingold and others who participated in or observed the group. The WELL came to occupy a central place in the lives of participants, fostering offline gatherings and the development of strong social bonds. (Haffner 2001; Rheingold 1999, 1993, 1991). Many of the earliest web-based groups originated as civic projects intended to encourage citizen interest and participation in the political process. Perhaps the largest state-level discussion forum is MN-POLITICS, an "interactive public commons to discuss and follow announcements on Minnesota public policy." The forum ([www.e-democracy.org](http://www.e-democracy.org)) was started by Minnesota E-Democracy, "a non-partisan, non-profit, volunteer-based organization whose mission is to improve participation in democracy in Minnesota through information networks." The website asserts that the audience is as important as the message and that the experience is "radically different" because "the value of the forum is completely in the hands of participants."

Public-sponsored forums were followed by private forums set up by individuals with shared interests or backgrounds. One such forum is K2k, a grassroots discussion forum begun in Knoxville, Tennessee, in November 1999 on E-groups (now switched to Yahoo Groups). The forum's earliest subscribers were like-minded individuals who sought to increase their interaction with one another and to continue conversation on their specified topic of shared interest: downtown Knoxville. At its website ([www.groups.yahoo.com/groups/k2k](http://www.groups.yahoo.com/groups/k2k)), k2k is described as "a subscription based forum designed to facilitate discussion about

the future of [Knoxville] with particular emphasis on issues related to Downtown." Consisting of subscribers who live in all areas of Knoxville and Knox County as well as in other locales, including Colorado and California, k2k currently has over 700 members, most of whom are not visibly active.

In considering the impact of the Internet on politics, the focus tends to be on the ways candidates or public officials can use technology as a tool in getting elected or in communicating with constituents. Typical are Newman's (1999) assertions that the Internet offers a cost-effective way to communicate directly with voters, constitutes a marketing tool similar to television, and allows candidates and officials to "appear high tech." Newman cites the potential of the Internet to bring alienated voters and citizens into the political process, but his example of "participation" is a citizen's ability to access a candidate's website in order to get more information. In fact, Newman asserts that the increased access to information through the Internet will fundamentally alter politics. Thomas (1995) sees the Internet as facilitating communication between citizens and government. Gastil (2000) emphasizes the cost-effectiveness of using the Internet as a tool for gathering citizen input. Cook (1998) depicts the Internet as increasing the possibility for interactivity, but he defines the interaction as the ability to select among stories or to pre-edit information to one's interests. His assertion that the Internet is primarily an extension of other forms of journalism reinforces the image of the movement of information as "one way" and "top down." Barber (1984) mentions the potential for "artificial" town meetings. Cornfield (2000) mentions websites such as vote.com and YouthEVote as

providing greater access to information. Some see the impact of the Internet as small or as an extension of other, more traditional forms of political activity (Franklin 2001, Margolis and Resnick 2000, Musso et al. 2000, Scammell 2000). Some studies have considered the use of the Internet in engaging citizens, especially young voters (Carpini 2000, Cornfield 2000, Van Benschoten 2000). However, primarily the emphasis is on new ways information is conveyed to voters not on new ways citizens may participate or be engaged in civic affairs.

Too little study has been done of online political participation. Abramson et al. (1988) note that studies have focused on the ways the Internet is affecting campaigns and elections and governance by officials but not enough on the way the Internet is affecting citizen participation. Cavanaugh (2000) recommends exploring the capacity of the Internet to foster public voice. Dahlgren (2000) recommends studying active organized groups who have established an Internet presence. Friedland and Boyte and Van Benschoten (2000) are optimistic about the potential of the Internet to increase participation. Galston (2000) sees some potential but has reservations. Cornfield (2000) and others (Cavanaugh 2000, Putnam 2000) agree that it is too early to assess the impact of the Internet on political participation.

The advent of the Internet has made possible a new form of civic participation which may be one solution to the problem of civic disengagement. It is now possible for citizens to use the Internet as their place of association in meetings which take place at Internet-based discussion forums. The metaphors used to describe these groups are interesting. Rheingold compares the WELL to



a neighborhood pub or coffee shop. Connery (1996) compares the public discussions taking place on the Internet to the Greek agora, to eighteenth century coffee houses, and to New England town halls. All of these are public spaces, but clearly, a cybergroup's advantage over the other three meeting places is expandability and lack of physical restraints. Habermas (1989A, 1989B) defines the public sphere in eighteenth century coffee houses as an unregulated space in which all are entitled to participate in the domain in which public opinion is formed. However, in recognizing the restraints of time and place, Habermas (1989B) asserts that in the modern world, mass media (newspapers, periodicals, radio, and television) constitute the public sphere. However, within these forums interaction is limited. Because of space constraints, only so many letters to the editor can be published; because of time constraints, only so many callers to the radio program can speak. With a cybergroup, the scope of interaction is theoretically unlimited. Practically speaking, participants at an Internet-based discussion group can read only a certain volume. Levine (2000) notes the time required to sift through messages. Nugent (2001) asserts that the messages posted at discussion boards can consist of thoughtful debated among educated persons or of superficial, emotional, and highly partisan exchanges. According to Rheingold (1993), the value of the group comes from the quality of the dialogue and the knowledge and expertise of contributors. Kovach and Rosenstiel (2001) mention the difference between a forum and a "food fight" and note that new media tend to devalue expertise.

Putnam (2000) asserts that we do not yet know whether the technology will foster social connectedness, but he concludes that the potential is there for the Internet to offset the decline in other, more traditional forms of participation. Nie (2001) finds that Internet users tend to have a higher degree of social connectivity and participation, not because they are Internet users but because they are more educated, more prosperous, and less elderly. Putnam lists four “challenges” to the hypothesis that web-based communication will result in “new and improved communities.” The first challenge is the “digital divide,” the possibility that access to the technology is denied to society’s “have nots,” thereby creating a system of “cyberapartheid.” Bimber (2000) finds that access to and use of the Internet are affected by both socioeconomic factors and gender, with the gap in access mainly explained by socioeconomic factors and the gap in use explained by a combination of socioeconomic factors and gender.

The second challenge is the inability of the medium to transmit nonverbal messages (even with the use of “emoticons”), thereby making it difficult for participants to build trust and goodwill. The third challenge is “cyberbalkanization,” the tendency for groups to form around narrow interests, thereby creating homogeneous like-minded communities. The Internet makes it possible for persons with narrow, specific interests to locate and communicate with each other. Chambers and Kopstein (2001) discuss the problems of “bad” groups and point out that not all association is “good.” The fourth challenge is the privacy inherent in communication in cyberspace, thereby raising the possibility that such communication could encourage greater social isolation

instead of greater social connectivity. Putnam's hypothesis is that the Internet will foster civic engagement only if it is used to reinforce "real" communities not replace them with "counterfeit" communities in cyberspace. Fernback and Thompson (2001) distinguish between cybergroups that have purely social functions and those that are centered around some common interest. According to Baker and Ward (2000), Internet-based groups serve as "intensifiers" for existing community interests. They argue that starting a cybergroup just because the technology exists to do so is likely to result in a "cyber ghost town."

Traditional definitions of community have emphasized place and face-to-face interaction. However, according to Galston (2000), it is important not to build these two factors into the definition of community because to do so eliminates Internet-based groups by fiat. Anderson (1983) notes that communities are imagined boundaries and are held together by shared cultural practices. Healy (1996) sees several limitations to community building on the Internet: access, voluntary nature, and non-instrumentality. Galston (2000) considers four features of community (limited number, shared norms, affective ties, and a sense of mutual obligation) and concludes that all except shared norms are problematic for cybergroups. Wilbur (1996) concludes that the subject matter is more important than relationships in most cybergroups. Foster (1996) asserts that communication alone does not constitute a community. Baym (1998) asserts that online communities are communities if they think they are communities. Bimber (1998) defines three characteristics of communities—familiarity, stability, and social pressure. Van Vliet and Burgers (1987) note three

essential elements of communities: social interaction, a shared value system, and a shared symbol system. Rheingold (1993) argues that three things turn associations into communities: longevity, critical mass, and sufficient human feeling. Lockard (1996) compares cybergroups to inflatable rubber dolls and argues that to conceptualize a cybergroup as community is an indication of how disconnected we are from a real community. However, Levine (2001) writes that participants in cybergroups sometimes form strong bonds that transfer offline. Indeed, there is some indication that some offline activity may be necessary in order to develop the bonds that constitute community. Haffner (2001), a participant in the WELL, writes that offline gatherings were an important cohering factor for that group. According to Blanchard and Horan (1998), engagement increases when virtual communities develop around physically-based communities and where the virtual community fosters additional communities of interest. Matel and Ball-Rokeach (2001) stress the importance of online social connections being supported by pre-existing offline networks. Robins and Webster (1999) assert that virtual communities offer a retreat from the real world. Kroker and Weinstein (1994) use the term "bunkering in" to describe participation in a cybergroup. Meyrowitz (1985) claims that electronic messages help to "democratize" isolated places by permitting access to others and to information. Lately, advice for constructing web-based communities is being published. One such book, *Community Building on the Web* (Kim 2000), gives nine "design strategies" for building a successful online community: defining and articulate purpose; building flexible, extensible gathering places; creating meaningful and

evolving member profiles; designing for a range of roles; developing a strong leadership program; encouraging appropriate etiquette; promoting cyclic events; integrating the rituals of community life; and facilitating member-run sub-groups.

### **Groups in Cyberspace: The Associational Dimension**

Groups are ubiquitous actors in the American political process. Thus, groups have been the subject of a significant number of studies in the twentieth century. However, little attention has been directed to cybergroups. These groups, unlike their traditional counterparts, exist only as Internet-based forums. The technology which makes possible their existence defines their scope and operation. Yet little systematic study has been directed to this new type of group. In addition, grassroots cybergroups afford a compelling subject for study because less attention has traditionally been paid to the systematic study of local groups. It may be assumed that a characteristic of grassroots organizing is its highly personal, face-to-face operation. What are the implications when a grassroots political organization trades face-to-face interaction for communication by posted messages?

Traditional groups have been widely studied, but cybergroups are so new to the political scene that researchers have just now begun to study them. Cybergroups appear to be fundamentally different from traditional groups. Traditional groups are structured and hierarchical; present some cost to members; require some overhead and, possibly, staff; may have difficulty recruiting members; and can take time to mobilize (Ciglar and Loomis 1995; Mundo 1992; Ciglar 1991; Hrebenar and Scott 1990; Mahood 2000, 1967; Berry

1989; Truman 1971; Bentley 1967). Cybergroups have minimal leadership and structure and no formal hierarchy, present little cost to members, are easily formed with fluid membership, have little or no overhead, and can be quickly mobilized.

Organized groups are a key component of the American polity. Thus, it should come as no surprise that groups have been the subject of scholarly inquiry. Scholarly research on the subject of groups has considered the reasons groups form, the ways groups attract and retain members, the ways groups are structured, and the role and the impact of groups in the policy process. Most recently, some attention has been directed to the ways technology has impacted group operation; however, these studies have mainly focused on the ways traditional groups are using technology. (Ciglar and Loomis 1995, Guth et al. 1995, Mundo 1992, Shaiko 1991). While there is some awareness of the potential for a group to form and to carry out its purpose only in its Internet-based incarnation, there has been no systematic study of the ways such a group should cause us to reconsider the concepts developed to describe groups and the ways they operate.

With recent advances in technology, groups have altered and expanded their activities to include beneficial innovations such as fax machines, word processors, voice mail systems, and electronic mail. These technologies have greatly expanded the abilities of groups to communicate within the membership, with political leaders, and with the media. In addition, since the opening up of the world wide web, organizations have developed and maintained websites for use

as recruitment tools, communication vehicles, public relations mechanisms, and "virtual" meeting places. A few organizations' websites include discussion forums where members may participate in conversations about issues. The world wide web also makes possible the formation of groups who develop and exist solely in a web-based form.

Local grassroots political organizations are citizen-based groups which form to influence policy in one or more areas. The technology exists for a local grassroots political organization to use the world wide web in two very different ways. The more traditional way is to use the web as an adjunct to the group's existence and its other activities. An organization's website serves as a tool of communications, recruitment, and public relations. In this instance, a traditional group has simply broadened its techniques to include the latest technological advances. In particular, E-mail or threaded discussions may be used as tools in much the same way that the members use telephones and fax machines--to communicate with each other and with persons outside the organization. Technology has allowed grassroots organizations to reduce certain kinds of operational expenses. Without computers, grassroots lobbying activities would be much more expensive as well as time-consuming. However, the technology also allows the formation of a local grassroots citizen group that exists solely on the world wide web

Putnam (1995) has noted the weakening of social ties in America in the last several decades. Rheingold (1993) sees virtual communities as a response to people's desire for community but asserts that we do not yet know whether

virtual communities are real communities, pseudo-communities, or some completely new form of community. Etzioni (1996) notes that virtual communities are not as effective as real communities in creating bonds, building accountability, and avoiding misunderstandings but that the Internet does allow members to transcend physical boundaries and to create records of their interactions. Cybergroups may contribute to the fragmentation of American life by encouraging communication among isolated individuals who, except when they communicate in cyberspace, are still isolated from each other. Rheingold (1993) cites the value of face to face meetings among cybergroup members and notes the bias towards those who can use language in ways that manipulate others, the emergence of norms, and the fact that a crowd of “regulars” can emerge.

There have been some considerations of the dynamics made possible by the convergence of technology and democracy—teledemocracy or electronic democracy (Bimber 1998; Corrado and Firestone 1996; Grossman 1995; Etzioni 1993; Rheingold 1993, 1991; Cronin 1989; Abramson, Arterton, and Orren 1988; Arterton 1987; Barber 1984; Laudon 1977). Most studies have tended to focus on the national political scene, on the possibilities of mass scale town meetings, online voting, and the like. Few conclusions have been drawn. One writer, who is largely positive in discussing the democratizing potential of technology, nonetheless notes that “Virtual communities could help citizens revitalize democracy or they could be luring us into an attractively packaged substitute for democratic discourse” (Rheinhold 1993, p. 276). Bimber (1998) believes the



Internet has resulted in a form of “accelerated pluralism” which while accelerating group formation and altering power structures is not revolutionizing democracy. Bryan and McClaughrey (1989) assert that the value of new communications media will be seen in its application at the local level rather than in attempts to approximate town meetings with mass audiences. Underlying some of the discussion of grassroots cyberdemocracy is a longing for communitarian democracy, a decentralized, participatory type of democracy with the “good” of the community as its goal (Abramson, Arterton, and Orren 1988). Aikens and Koch (2001) maintain electronic communication rearranges the power structure of traditional political communication by allowing better access to information and a “leveling” of the hierarchy of traditional communication. Both Browning (1996) and Grossman (1995) point to the potential of the Internet to level communication such that mediating institutions—including groups—are omitted from the process. In this view, new technology instead of facilitating group formation negates the need for this form of association altogether.

### **Studying the New Dimension**

The time has come systematically to study cyberspace as public space and participation in cybergroups as a form of civic engagement. Most especially, it is appropriate to begin to understand the extent to which participation in Internet-based associations might provide an antidote to the problem of civic disengagement. Toward this end, this study intensively investigates the formation, operation, and impact of a local cybergroup within a frame of civic participation. This is done through the systematic study of the group k2k

operating in the Knoxville, Tennessee region. It will reveal important information about participation in cyberspace as a new form of civic engagement and about the nature and impact of groups in cyberspace.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is three fold. First, it explores the relationship between technology and politics by focusing on the rise of cyberspace as an emerging part of the public sphere in American democracy. Second, it seeks to describe and explain the nature and impact of cyberparticipation as a form of political activity. Third, it undertakes an evaluation of the impact of cyberparticipation on participants and the community. This is accomplished through the systematic study of k2k, an important and highly active internet group operating since 1999 in East Tennessee.

### **Study Overview**

The analytic model framing the study, research design, and methods is presented in Chapter Two. In Chapter Three, based largely on extensive personal interviews with key k2k participants, the history, organization, and operation of k2k are described and analyzed. Chapter Four offers a multivariate model and analysis of the results of a comprehensive survey of k2k participants. It provides a basis for the preliminary assessment of the impact of cyberparticipation on citizens and the polity. The final chapter, Chapter Five, includes a summary of the study findings and draws conclusions based on them. It concludes with a presentation of the implications of the study and recommendations regarding future research.

## **Chapter 2: Study Framework, Design and Methods**

### **Introduction**

This chapter presents the analytic framework, research design, and analytic methods employed in this study. The analytic frame is a modification of Milbrath's hierarchy of participation adjusted for the cyberage. It is buttressed by a model of cybergroup activity that guides a systematic assessment of the impact of participation in K2k upon citizen-participants and the community.

### **Study Framework**

#### **Individual Participation**

In considering the worldwide web as public space in which citizens can participate in civic affairs, it is necessary to reconceptualize Milbrath's hierarchy of political participation. This reconceptualization is presented in Figure 2.1 and focuses attention on specific types of participation that contribute to civic life—but would not necessarily translate into the traditional terms of Milbrath's mid-sixties model. Further, Milbrath's original hierarchy focuses attention too narrowly on voting and partisan politics to the exclusion of broader forms of civic engagement—especially public policy formation and implementation. The activities highlighted in Figure 2.1, nevertheless, rely upon Milbrath's fundamental assumption, i.e. that citizen participation activities are cumulative and vary significantly depending upon the amount of initiative—investment in time, resources, and energy—the individual is willing and/or able to expend. Thus, it is posited that in cyberspace there are those *Spectators* who merely

attend to what others are actively doing in providing stimuli by posting messages on the website. These people are called “Lurkers.” And, then there are those who actually take the initiative to contribute to the discussion. These people are called “Posters.” These we compare to the *Gladiators* who, for example, seek votes or policy support in the community and from public officials on issues emerging from their regular and consistent involvement in cybergroup discussions and activities.

### **Associational Effectiveness**

In addition to the *individual* dimension of participation in cyberspace, there is the *associational* dimension. This raises the question of how the cybergroup compares to more traditional groups. Of special concern for our purpose is group effectiveness—more specifically the *elements* of group effectiveness. Table 2.1 (See Appendix B for all tables) presents the important elements of traditional group effectiveness as these have been identified in the scholarly literature (Mahood 2000, 1967; Cigler and Loomis 1995; Guth et al 1995; Cigler 1991; Hrebenar and Scott 1990; Berry 1989; Olson 1965). Since cybergroups form and operate on the worldwide web, only a subset of these elements seems essential to their effectiveness. These five are identified in Table 2.2.

Sixteen elements have been identified as important to the effectiveness of all groups. This study proposes that some of these elements are more essential than others in studying the effectiveness of cybergroups. The following have been identified as essential elements of effectiveness for cybergroups:

leadership, goal focus, cohesiveness, organizational complexity, and use of technology.

*Leadership* is essential to the effectiveness of any group. Leaders contribute to the structure and goal focus of a group. In addition, the credibility of the group may be connected with the persona of the group leaders who represent the group in the community.

*Goal focus* is a significant element for any group. Cybergroups are certainly not exempt from this need. A cybergroup which cannot articulate its purpose will have trouble attracting members. A cybergroup that loses its focus may suffer loss of membership. If members are motivated to join for a sense of shared purpose, the feeling that the organization has lost sight of its purpose leads to disillusionment with the group and especially with its leadership who may be blamed for the loss of focus. The purposive benefits of group membership are lost to members. Therefore, a cybergroup that wishes to attract, retain, and motivate members must have a focus that is not only articulated but shared among the membership.

*Cohesiveness* is desirable in any organization. A cybergroup may serve an important social function in the lives of members. A sense of camaraderie may develop among members. Cohesiveness may be enhanced when face-to-face activities accompany the group's online existence. The solidary benefits of group membership are lost without this group cohesiveness, this esprit des corps. A cybergroup enhances its effectiveness when solidary benefits are combined with purposive benefits.

*Organizational complexity* is a feature of any effective group. It appears to be human nature to impose order in the guise of formalized structure and procedures. These features are important to group efficiency. The establishment of procedures and rules eliminates the need for a group to consider separately every issue that arises. Having established procedures enables a group to deal with events without the need to invent procedure for every new instance. The establishment of a group structure and hierarchy contributes to effectiveness. Having leaders selected by a process agreed upon and participated in by members lends authority and legitimacy to those leaders. The establishment of norms enhances group operations and also helps to maintain cohesiveness. Some assignment of roles of leadership and responsibility and some establishment of procedures, rules, and norms are essential to the effective operation of cybergroups.

It is a rare organization that has not adopted the advances of *technology* in ways that save both money and time. The efficiency made possible through word processors, fax machines, and E-mail is important to organizations. The time and money a group can save through use of Email to correspond with members may make the difference between whether a group is able to exist or not. It also greatly enhances the capability of a group to mobilize its membership quickly and easily. Use of computer technology to create an internet homepage for a group contributes to viability and identity as well as providing yet another tool for communication among members and for communication between the

group and those outside its membership. Obviously, a cybergroup is expected to exhibit a high degree of technical proficiency.

The essential expected differences between cyber and traditional forms of association are represented in Figure 2.2. It is not the purpose of this study to compare such groups—that is beyond our resources. However, Figure 2.2 emphasizes for purpose of clarity those aspects of cyberassociation most closely to be examined.

## **Research Design**

### **The Cybergroup k2k**

Traditional groups have been widely studied, but cybergroups are so new to the political scene that researchers have just now begun to study them. The purpose of this study is to examine cybergroup participation and explore the nature, operation, and impact of this form of association. The cybergroup studied for this inquiry is k2k. K2k began as an electronic discussion forum devoted to local civic affairs. Eventually it developed into an identifiable urban, community activist group. Its origins and history render k2k an excellent case study. K2k, begun in November 1999, is “a subscription based forum designed to facilitate discussion about the future of [Knoxville] with particular emphasis on issues related to Downtown” ([www.groups.yahoo.com/groups/k2k](http://www.groups.yahoo.com/groups/k2k)). Consisting of subscribers who live in all areas of Knoxville and Knox County as well as in other locales, k2k has over 700 members.

## **Research Strategy**

A dual research strategy was employed in this research. The first strategy was to gather material directly about the group and its activity. This involved a systematic and highly intensive monitoring of k2k internet activity to provide the essential information necessary to proceed with the personal interviews essential to the case study. The information gathered in this stage of the work provided the foundation for moving forward with additional interviews and observation. The second strategy was to undertake an extensive survey of k2k participants. In addition, the researcher used the results of a recently conducted survey of Knox County residents. Figure 2.3 presents the essential components and stages of the research strategy undertaken.

## **Unit of Analysis**

The basic unit of analysis in this study is the *individual* who participates, to any discernible degree, in k2k activity during the period studied—between 1999 and 2001. Following an extended period of observation, in which the on-line activities of individuals indirectly were observed, and during which key on-line information and documents were examined, key actors were identified. These key actors were then personally interviewed at-length. From these personal interviews and continued observation of on-line activity, an aggregate sense of k2k as a group emerged for purposes of analysis. The on-line activity of k2k participants is also studied as a social artifact for purposes of analysis, i.e. as the product of individuals and their behavior. Because certain k2k individuals also



met to further the means and ends of k2k, social interaction is also subject to analysis. Based on this mode of inquiry, an extensive analysis of individuals aggregated as a cyberassociation is undertaken.

## **Methods**

Information was drawn from interviews conducted with participants, policymakers, and media observers; an online survey of the members of k2k; Internet databases; and press archives. The personal interviews began with the list “owner” and those identified as “moderators.” Additional interviews were conducted with active participants and once-active participants. The once-active participants were interviewed in order to determine reasons for their change in status. In addition, several inactive members, called “lurkers,” were interviewed in order to determine the role these passive members play in the group’s dynamics. Also interviewed were media observers and public figures. The database of k2k messages, an archive consisting of over 30, 000 messages, is a source of information about k2k. Articles in the local press about the group are another source of information. Finally, the persons listed at the k2k website ([www.groups.yahoo.com/groups/k2k](http://www.groups.yahoo.com/groups/k2k)) as members of k2k were surveyed via Email. The survey asked questions regarding reasons for joining, modes and frequency of participation, and a number of demographic questions. A copy of the survey instrument is provided in Appendix C. Demographic information obtained from a recently conducted study of Knox County residents was used in order to compare and contrast k2k subscribers and Knox County residents. In

analyzing the information derived from these sources, the researcher used descriptive statistics, cross tabulations, and multivariate analysis. The primary research methods employed in the study are described in Appendix D: Primary Research Methods.

### **Research Expectations**

It is expected that citizens participating in k2k engage in activities which conform to the patterns associated with the model posited in Figure 2.1; i.e., there is a hierarchy of distinct activities that are cumulative and that vary based on the degree of initiative involved. Over time, it is expected that patterns assume the regularity and roles associated with other forms of groups. Once this occurs, it is expected that the new cybergroup can be recognized and evaluated in its effectiveness and impact—with attention to the elements shown in Figure 2.2. More specifically, given the nature of an Internet-based discussion group, we would not expect formal leadership positions to exist within k2k. At most, we might observe the emergence of informal opinion leaders, but it would also be expected that these informal leaders would change on an ad hoc basis.

It is expected, further, that k2k would have some stated goals but that these would be minimal in nature. In addition, because of the nature and constancy of interaction among members, it is expected that there would be frequent opportunity and temptation to be diverted from the stated goals of the group. Because there are some stated goals, there may be intermittent efforts to refocus members when diffusion of goals is observed, but these efforts would not be expected to be successful for very long.

With regard to cohesiveness, it is expected that k2k will not promote a strong sense of cohesiveness. In fact, there may be debate among members about whether k2k is a group and whether it does or even should have a group identity. Members who participate in the dialogue on k2k may think of themselves as doing something or as participating in a worthwhile or interesting activity but are not likely to perceive themselves as members of a unified group.

It is anticipated that k2k will have almost no organizational complexity. Leadership positions will be nonexistent. Guidelines, procedures, standards, and rules will be minimal, and where they exist there will be low compliance. The impulsive and freewheeling nature of the discussion board format will encourage independence and free expression. A transgression, if such a thing can be said to exist, might be followed by an “oops” but no real sanctions, thus further discouraging establishment or observance of standards or rules.

Finally, since k2k exists as an internet discussion board, its use of technology is extremely high and is perhaps its most essential element. Participants are expected to be relatively sophisticated and comfortable with technology; indeed it is likely one of the primary inducements to this form of participation and association.

### **Analytic Model**

In order to evaluate the impact of participation in k2k, an analytic model was developed. This model is presented in Figure 2.4. The model will be tested using data derived from the survey. In this model it is posited that as people

participate in the cybergroup they become more informed from the interaction with others and they are motivated to bring more information to the group. This increases the knowledge of others in the group as well as the group's overall perception of efficacy within the community. As enough people participate and disseminate both knowledge and strategy for community action, the greater community itself is affected by both the increased awareness among others of the group's activity and points of view. In addition the community is affected by the direct action taken by members of the group in forming the community policy agenda and acting upon it. As a result more people are likely to participate; passive participants are likely to participate actively, and active participants are likely to increase their participation.

## **Chapter 3: K2k: An Urban Cybergroup**

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this chapter is to analyze the origin, development, activities, and structure of k2k. The description of the group's origin and the review of the first months of its existence include a detailed description of the episode which first brought the existence of the group to public attention. "A Chronology of Important K2k Events" is provided in Table 3.1. Focusing upon the five structural components of a group--*leadership, goal focus, organizational complexity, cohesiveness, and use of technology*-- then provides a basis for comparing this cybergroup with more traditional forms of association

### **Origin of k2k**

In October 1999, Buzz Goss and Cherie Piercy-Goss, a husband and wife team of architects based in downtown Knoxville, Tennessee, decided to initiate an Internet-based discussion group devoted to issues related to downtown Knoxville. Wanting to leave a "legacy of activism" and being familiar with the E-Groups format, having used it to communicate with a geographically scattered group of friends, they started a discussion group which quickly attracted about 30 members. Soon afterwards, believing that the format of an Internet-based discussion forum had great potential, they disbanded that group and prepared to launch a second one as soon as they had a "good name" for the group, something Buzz Goss felt was important. The name "k2k" was decided upon during a discussion at a downtown pub with Scott Scheinbaum, the early k2k subscriber who came up with the name, being awarded a beer for his efforts.

In November 1999, Goss and Piercy-Goss created what was termed a “Happy Hour” list of 61 persons believed to be interested in participating in an Internet-based discussion group focused on issues related to downtown Knoxville and started k2k at [www.egroups.com](http://www.egroups.com). Invitations were issued to those 61 persons, many of whom subscribed to the group. Those invited to subscribe were what some have termed “downtown denizens,” people who work and/or live downtown and who socialize together at various downtown locales. The initial subscriber base was enlarged when the founders distributed cards promoting k2k at a forum on downtown Knoxville sponsored by *Metro Pulse*, the local weekly “alternative” newspaper.

The invitations to the “Happy Hour” list and the cards distributed at the *Metro Pulse* forum resulted in the initial subscriber base of k2k, which was 47 persons on November 9, 1999. Within another week, after an item in *Metro Pulse*’s “Ear to the Ground” gossip column mentioned the group, there were additional subscriptions for a subscriber base of 65 persons. In addition, what was described as “thousands” of the k2k cards were downloaded, printed, and distributed by numerous individuals, resulting in still more subscriptions. The publicity the group received when it entered the fray surrounding a controversial downtown construction project, a proposed Justice Center, resulted in another wave of subscribers. By January 2000, there were around 200 subscribers. K2k’s perceived role in the defeat of the Justice Center resulted in yet another increase in subscribers. Clearly, some considerable interest and momentum were achieved in the first several months of the group’s existence. Membership

has continued to increase, at least according to the member directory at Yahoo Groups. In early 2002, there are over 700 listed subscribers.

In interviews, early subscribers described k2k during its first couple of months as an expansion of the discussions they had been having with each other in social settings. They all knew each other. They talked face to face when they were together, and they used k2k to continue the conversation when they were not together. One early subscriber pointed out the convenience afforded by k2k. Subscribers could participate in the discussion while at work and while at home, from anywhere they had access to the Internet. Numerous early subscribers who were interviewed described their practice of periodically checking in on k2k throughout their workdays. An early member of the group described the habitual message-checking behavior of many subscribers as “compulsive.” This compulsive behavior results in what might be called “k2k time.” Topics flare up and die down in a couple of days. Someone who is away for two days risks missing the opportunity to participate in a thread composed of hundreds of messages.

K2k was also perceived by its early subscribers as a way to enlarge the conversation to greater numbers than could fit into the rooms, primarily downtown restaurants and pubs, in which they had been meeting. At that time they apparently did not envision the extent to which the discussion would spread and the numbers that would be attracted to subscribe if not to participate more actively by posting messages. One early subscriber described the moment when someone no one knew first joined the discussion as a “defining” moment. One of

the group's current moderators, Leslie Terry, knew no one in the group when she subscribed. A number of subscribers who were interviewed said they had never met face to face with any of those who frequently post messages. Another significant event in the first weeks was the appearance of messages from "Vhashe" beginning November 13, 1999. It turned out that this subscriber was Victor Ashe, Mayor of the city of Knoxville.

Mayor Ashe proved to be a prolific poster of messages on k2k during the first few months, sometimes posting several short messages in a row in response to other messages. Fairly quickly, the Mayor established his willingness to parry with k2k's subscribers. Other recognizable names began appearing on the k2k subscriber list: members of local media, elected officials from both city and county government, and public servants of various kinds. It became a well-known, if not easily verifiable, fact that various persons connected to either local media or to city or county government were "participating" on k2k either as "lurkers" or because associates "forwarded" them messages posted on k2k. This subscriber mix proved important during the period when k2k first attracted significant media and public attention. The group's founders mentioned events looming on the horizon as an impetus for the group's genesis. Those events were connected to various downtown development issues, particularly the expectation of proposals for significant downtown revitalization projects. However, the first issue that became the group's focus--and the one which generated early publicity for the group--was a rather unusual downtown development issue: the proposed construction of a downtown Justice Center.



## **The Defeat of the Justice Center**

Given the structure of government in Knoxville and Knox County and the perceived shortage of space available for corrections facilities and courtrooms in the City-County Building in downtown Knoxville, the initial proposal for a Justice Center at a location on State Street in downtown Knoxville had much potential appeal. As initially proposed, the site would combine a number of important law enforcement functions into a central location. As the project developed, however, significant changes in the plan resulted in a project that came to be perceived as more of a “downtown jail” than as a “justice center” that would combine numerous activities by separate agencies. The debate surrounding the project centered on the Knox County Sheriff’s Department which advocated the project and the Knox County Attorney General’s Office which opposed the project after having initially supported it.

In December 1999 when k2k became involved, the project was regarded by many in the community as a “done deal.” Several subscribers on k2k , including Jesse Fox Mayshark, now editor of *Metro Pulse*, posted messages stating the impossibility of stopping the project. Sheriff Tim Hutchison, a powerful political figure, seemed determined that the project be completed. The *Knoxville News-Sentinel* was on record in support of the project, and the majority of County Commissioners (13-6) supported the project. The opposition to the project voiced by a few County Commissioners and by Attorney General Randy Nichols was not garnering much support. In November 1999, Robert Loest, an early subscriber, posted a poll at k2k asking subscribers to tell whether they favored or

opposed the Justice Center project. When discussion revealed the group's plan to give the results of the poll to City Council, Mayor Ashe posted a message reminding the group that opposition should be more appropriately conveyed to County Commission. Around this time, John Gill, in the Attorney General's Office, posted a message stating that the opposition should focus on the changes in the project which made it a "prison" instead of a "justice center." On December 3, 1999, Loest posted a message urging subscribers to contact Congressman John Duncan to inform him of their opposition to the project and to enlist his help. From the start, opposition to the project on k2k was almost visceral. Since many of the early subscribers considered downtown Knoxville, the proposed location for the Justice Center, their neighborhood, the NIMBY (Not in My Back Yard) principle came into play not in the usual suburban or rural neighborhood fighting a waste disposal facility or a telecommunications tower but in a center city with a newly connected group of activists. That this group was an Internet-based discussion group rather than a more traditional local grassroots organization became evident as the battle raged over the Justice Center in December 1999 and in January 2000.

In the almost two months before the crucial January 24, 2000, County Commission meeting, a core group of k2k subscribers used the forum to denounce the project, to plan strategy, to announce meetings, to edit a petition in opposition to the project, and to distribute copies of the petition to a broad audience. They mounted letter writing campaigns, encouraged various civic and cultural groups to announce their opposition to the project, voiced their opposition

to County Commissioners and other public officials, and contacted print and television journalists. The level of activity on k2k as measured by the number of messages increased dramatically. In December 1999, there were 604 messages posted; in January 2000, there were 1461 posted messages.

On January 5, the *Knoxville News-Sentinel* ran a front page story with the headline "Opposition Mounts to Justice Center." Subsequent stories in that paper and in *Metro Pulse* along with letters to the editor and some television coverage gave the opposition momentum and increased public awareness of opposition to the project. The estimated \$90 million cost of the project was emphasized along with the opposition's fears that the Center would have a negative effect on downtown development. Media spots were developed by opponents along with a one-word slogan "Reconsider," which appeared on a banner and on stickers worn by opponents at the January 24 meeting.

At public meetings in different parts of the city, citizens began expressing their reservations about the project. One County Commissioner who was interviewed described attending a meeting in a residential area a few miles from downtown, where an estimated 90 percent of those in attendance were against the construction of the proposed Justice Center.

The petition in opposition to the project was drafted starting December 31 with numerous subscribers participating in an extensive online peer editing process that continued until January 4. The petition was ultimately made available online in various locations and in various formats so that it could be Emailed and easily downloaded and printed by k2k subscribers and by others.

Various locations and methods were created for the drop-off of completed petitions. The group collected 3,000 signatures in just under three weeks.

The activists on k2k were not the only ones preparing for the January 24 meeting. The night before the meeting, “notebooks” were delivered to the homes of the 13 County Commissioners known to be in favor of the project. The same notebooks were given to the other six Commissioners, the ones who opposed the project, when they arrived at the meeting. The notebooks consisted of approximately 500 posted messages from k2k, rearranged into sections with titles such as “The Mayor Weighs In” (messages posted by Mayor Ashe) and “The Freshman Class (messages posted by Commissioner John Schmid). Though not known at the time, it was later revealed that the notebooks, which came to be known as the “Evil Binders,” were created and distributed by Sheriff’s Department Chief Deputy Dwight Van de Vate, who later subscribed to and participated on k2k under the Email moniker “evil binder guy.”

These notebooks received prominent media coverage. A message that had been posted by Mayor Ashe and included in the notebooks was read aloud on one local television news program. A subsequent article in *Metro Pulse* described the meeting, the petitions, and the notebooks; printed excerpts from k2k; presented interviews with a number of subscribers; and included directions for subscribing. According to the article in *Metro Pulse*, Van de Vate prepared the notebooks “because he wanted Commission to be apprised of the group and its activities.” Many k2k subscribers felt the notebooks were distributed with the intention of discrediting the project’s opponents but that the tactic “backfired.”

Membership in k2k grew dramatically at the end of January. On January 25, the day after the meeting, there were 30 new subscribers.

Commission voted 19-0 to put a hold on construction of the Justice Center, effectively killing the project. Not surprisingly, given the nature of the project, there were not large numbers of citizens who mobilized to support a downtown jail—or Justice Center, depending upon how one defined the project. An employee of the Knox County Sheriff's Department stated that k2k “killed a dead project.” He iterated, “prisons are unpopular construction projects...It's not hard to defeat a prison.”

Following the meeting, k2k claimed responsibility for the defeat of the project. While no one who was interviewed disputed that k2k had an impact, opinion varied regarding the degree of impact. Some k2k subscribers flatly stated, “k2k stopped the downtown jail.” Other subscribers said that k2k in combination with Randy Nichols, Knox County Attorney General, stopped the project. Fewer subscribers cited a multiplicity of factors. However, when others in the community, including County Commissioners and journalists, were interviewed, while no one disputed that k2k had an effect on the decision, no one credited k2k quite as much as k2k subscribers did. There were some who cited both k2k and Randy Nichols. Far more common, however, were those who cited a number of factors, some public and some less well publicized, as key in halting the project. Some who were interviewed felt that k2k had an “inflated” sense of its role in defeating the project. Interestingly, a number of k2k participants said they were “surprised” at their success. One subscriber said he hoped k2k had

not “peaked too soon” with such an early visible success. One subscriber said there was some sense of “what happens next?”

### **Leadership**

Yahoo Groups requires the designation of a group “owner” and also allows for “moderators.” Those are the only formal leadership positions in k2k. Initially, the owner of the group was Buzz Goss, but Steve Dupree, an early subscriber, became the owner about six months after the group was begun. The owner might be regarded as the “head moderator” though no one involved with k2k uses that term. The owners and moderators have few formal duties. There is a separate owners/moderators discussion group so that this group can discuss group operations and issues privately. For example, when this researcher approached the group’s owner regarding administration of a survey, approval had to be obtained from the group’s moderators. In addition, the moderators also reviewed and made revision suggestions to the survey in draft form. In discussing the survey, the moderators not only reviewed the questions but also considered issues of privacy. Because the survey was to be Emailed to subscribers, the moderators ultimately decided to resolve the privacy issue by having the survey come from the moderators instead of from the researcher. A short paragraph in the message to subscribers identified the researcher and explained that the survey results would be used in a doctoral dissertation. However, the message informing subscribers about the survey and encouraging them to complete it began with the phrase “We the moderators of k2k...,” thus establishing the survey as a k2k endeavor and perhaps lending the survey

greater credibility among subscribers than if it had been administered by the researcher.

Moderators receive regular updates from Yahoo Groups on information which pertains to them and to subscribers of their groups, for example, service announcements, scheduled maintenance, member programs, business partnerships, and new features. There are certain customizable settings owners and moderators can select. For example, they determine whether attachments are permitted, whether the group's archives are public or private, and whether banner ads will be permitted. Moderators have the option of paying \$4.95 per month or \$59.40 annually as part of a "no advertisements" option. K2k currently permits advertisements rather than pay the fee. Periodically, there are complaints from subscribers about the intrusiveness of the advertisements.

Moderators can exert control over the discussion on k2k if they wish, but, for the most part, they choose to allow subscribers a great deal of freedom. According to one of the group's moderators, "It's important that the discussion be free and broad. We have discussed this a lot on the moderator list group." From time to time, a moderator will post a message advising someone that he or she has violated one of the unwritten norms of k2k. Often, the moderator will begin such a message with the statement that he or she is speaking as a moderator or is "wearing her moderator hat." In these cases, the moderator will sometimes add the title "owner" or "moderator." One moderator noted in an interview, "When I speak as a moderator, I'm careful to say that I'm speaking as a moderator." One member noted that "The owner is the leader when he chooses

to exercise that position, which isn't very often." One member interviewed said it was obvious that "Steve [Dupree] is a leader because of the forceful way he expresses himself and because he invokes the fact that he's the "owner."

Dupree sometimes reminds the group that he's the owner in a way perhaps best described as "colorful":

While we are an open, more or less free-wheeling sort of cyberplace, I will not have my forum become a platform for character assassination and gossip...It will cease immediately! (k2k #11273).

I reiterate, the group is mine. I am the designated list owner. I am not required to give a big furry rat's rear how many folks love a good coffee chat. If I so desire, I can moderate individuals or the whole group. My choice. Period. (k2k #13761).

While Dupree sometimes posts messages which list reminders of good "netiquette" or k2k norms, his posts as owner often can be summarized as saying "Stop right now because I say so," a periodic dictatorial stance leavened by humor.

Admonitions from moderators appear when a message is perceived to have made a personal attack, to have gone far astray from the topic of downtown Knoxville, or to have strayed into partisan politics. The moderators who were interviewed feel they have had to do "very little of that sort of thing." Moderators also post messages from time to time reminding subscribers to avoid posting pithy personal responses (you da man, you go girl, attaboy, or--the infamously favorite k2k rejoinder--"forsooth") and to change subject lines when the subject of a message changes. However, these admonitions regarding violations of group



norms are just as likely to come from other subscribers as from moderators. A number of subscribers described the group as “self-policing.”

Sometimes a subscriber posts messages of a nature that cause him to be identified by the moderators as a potential problem. In this case, according to several moderators who were interviewed, there is usually a great deal of discussion on the private moderators’ list about how to handle the problem. According to the moderators, they prefer to admonish such subscribers with private messages rather than with public messages on k2k. According to a moderator, after one person was spoken to off-list, he chose to unsubscribe from k2k. In extreme circumstances, moderators can choose to filter a subscriber’s messages, using a function called “moderator control.” In this case, a subscriber’s message is first sent to the moderators, any one of whom can choose to forward the message to the public board if it is deemed acceptable. The moderators say that they have had to exercise this moderator responsibility very infrequently. One moderator stated, “We can screen posts, but we have done that with only a couple of people.”

Applications to join k2k as a subscriber go to the owner/moderators, any one of whom can approve an application. In theory, moderators can reject applicants, but in practice no subscriber has been rejected. Two subscribers were terminated after they were accepted. One was terminated because it was learned that the individual had signed up using an alias. This situation has the potential to become a little tricky. Many subscribers are known only by Email addresses, many of which are rather cryptic—reydog, electric cello, evil binder

guy. Others are known by Email addresses which consist of combinations of names and initials—bminchey, wlterry, cmoxley, ullrich—or which indicate a business name—futura. However, the initial application for membership at Yahoo Groups, or at its predecessor E-Groups, requests the subscriber's name, address, and other information. This information is used in the creation of a member profile, which can be either public or private, meaning shared with the group or not. Thus, when it became known that someone had subscribed using an alias as his name in order to infiltrate the group and "plant" messages, his subscription was terminated. In the only other termination, it was discovered that the subscriber had joined primarily to use k2k to conduct a vendetta against another subscriber with whom a family member had a business disagreement.

In addition to the responsibilities outlined above, moderators take on different voluntary roles. Brent Minchey and Steve Dupree do what one moderator termed "site maintenance." Another pointed out that Rachel Craig "does links," which means that she frequently posts links to articles of interest in the *Knoxville News-Sentinel*, *Metro Pulse*, and the *Halls Shopper*, particularly that weekly's section "Gossip, Politics, and Lies." However, other subscribers also post links to articles they believe may be of interest; thus, this responsibility is not solely the responsibility of one moderator. Some moderators are more visibly active on k2k than others. Several of the moderators post messages infrequently and do not publicly exert their positions as moderators. There is no formal procedure for selection of moderators. According to a member, "Steve [Dupree] picked the moderators."

In addition to the formal leadership positions of owner/moderators, most subscribers who were interviewed acknowledged that informal leaders tended to emerge. One subscriber characterized the emergence of leaders in this way:

We reject tyrants, presidents, and kings and run on loose consensus. There are leaders who emerge through words and deeds. The owner and moderators rein people in, but it's self-policing. You get credibility by being educated, clear, consistent, and on target. You have credibility if I don't agree with you, but you stretch my mind.

A moderator said "The moderators theoretically guide discussion, but we really don't." One subscriber, whose opinion was echoed by numerous others, said "There are regulars, not leaders. " As one subscriber noted, "The frequent posters are leaders. There are people who talk a lot." Another said, "It's like King of the Castle—whoever steals the most bandwidth is the leader." One attributed being a leader with "charisma," with developing a "following." Several subscribers pointed out that those who write well or expressively tend to emerge as leaders or that people who appear "logical, rational, and knowledgeable" about an issue emerge as leaders. Several subscribers pointed to moderator Rachel Craig as a leader because she "has a good grasp of facts, is well-informed, and is even-keeled. " One subscriber said, "We blow off idiots. Credibility is based on what you write, how well you can articulate it. No crap is allowed—you'll get called on it." Regardless of how it was expressed, there emerged some consensus among those interviewed that certain people emerged as leaders because they earned the respect of other subscribers.

Other subscribers pointed out that there are different types of leaders, depending on the issue. One subscriber divided informal leaders into groups:

“There are subject matter experts. There are opinion leaders. These tend to be summarizers who write well. There are instigators. There are peacemakers and collaborators. There are the link masters. People play multiple roles.” Another subscriber pointed out that leadership is “situational rather than absolute.” Many subscribers expressed the belief that k2k worked best without formally defined leaders. One subscriber noted that “From the beginning Buzz Goss said k2k is not a group, and there are no leaders. I think people like the fact that there are no defined leaders. The decision-making process is long, democratic, and involved.” Most subscribers interviewed agreed that leadership on k2k was a tenuous thing. One subscriber compared being a leader on k2k to “herding cats.”

### **Goal Focus**

K2k’s only stated goals are expressed in the purpose statement on the group’s homepage at Yahoo Groups: “Knoxville in the 21st century -a subscription based forum designed to facilitate discussion about the future of our city with particular emphasis on issues related to Downtown.” When questioned about goals, subscribers agreed that the only stated goal was to promote discussion about downtown. Buzz Goss and Cherie Piercy-Goss, the founders of k2k, stated that they wanted to help make their neighborhood, downtown, a better place. In interviews, k2k subscribers expanded the stated purpose of k2k to include increasing participants’ knowledge of and participation in politics. They also expressed their support for increased public involvement and their desire to have an impact.

In interviews and in the open-ended responses to the survey, subscribers admitted that the discussion “gets off track from time to time,” but many also believed that “people are pretty good about reining others in when they get off track. “ As one participant noted, “It’s self-policing. If you write something that has nothing to do with downtown Knoxville, you’ll get jumped on.” Several people felt that k2k had lost some of its focus as the group had gotten larger. However, one former lurker who said she was in the “first wave of members” said she stopped reading after a few months because of the lack of focus: “I got bogged down in all the posing, staging, off the topic posts, bickering, time-consuming nonsense that one has to wade through to get to any meat with k2k.” A current subscriber asserted that “goals get focused and then re-focused. People come and go. Issues develop.”

### **Organizational Complexity**

K2k has almost no formal rules or structure. Anyone with an Email address can join. While the focus of the discussion is downtown Knoxville, Tennessee, and the majority of subscribers live in Knox County, there is no residency requirement. One prolific poster of messages, a former resident of Knoxville, resides now in Colorado. Another former resident participates from California.

Yahoo Groups, the forum where k2k resides, requires that a member be designated as “owner” and allows for some members to serve as “moderators.” There are a number of options from which the owner may choose. For example, the group may be designated as either “public” or “private,” an option that allows

the owner or moderators to control membership. If the group is public, then as soon as an individual submits the brief online request to join, he or she gains access to the forum. If the group is private, the individual cannot gain access to the forum until an owner or a moderator approves the request. Since k2k is a private group, theoretically the moderators control who may join; in practice, the request is essentially a formality as no one is rejected for membership. In a couple of cases, the moderators have rejected a subscriber after he was approved. In one case, it was discovered that the person was using an alias in order to infiltrate the group; in the other case, it was discovered that the individual had subscribed to pursue a vendetta against another subscriber. The k2k moderators made a conscious decision to keep membership as open as possible.

Discussions may be moderated or unmoderated. Though k2k has moderators, it is an unmoderated discussion. This option means that there is no set agenda other than the focus on downtown Knoxville. Moderators do not manage the discussions. However, moderators and others do sometimes point out that a discussion has strayed from the topic or deteriorated in some way. One subscriber said, "If you write something that has nothing to do with downtown Knoxville, you'll get jumped on. If you're too ornery, people will jump in and say enough of that crap. If the discussion of ideas degenerates, someone steps in." However, not everyone agrees on the value or relevance of a given topic. More than a few times when a moderator, or other subscriber, has mentioned that a topic of discussion does not seem related to downtown

Knoxville, other subscribers have answered with often impassioned explanations of why the topic is related to downtown Knoxville. Other times, if subscribers seem to be enjoying a particular thread, moderators seem loathe to step in and derail the discussion. One example of this is the infamous “Latte Wars” series of messages exchanged between early subscriber Robert Loest and Mayor Victor Ashe. Though owner Steve Dupree ultimately commanded the dialogue to end, it went on for several days (a long time in “k2k time”) with no intervention from the moderators. Months later, there is still an occasional insiders’ reference to “latte.” As heated as the latte wars became, they retained some element of humor. Other times, heated discussions have been cooled off with conciliatory messages from other subscribers. One subscriber described the discussions as “remarkably self-policing.” Another subscriber commented that he felt the moderators had been “lucky” that “no real problem people had popped up.”

There are no formal written rules other than the group’s statement of purpose. A few subscribers who were interviewed said there were no rules. One stated, “Some groups have too many rules. I like the fact there are no real rules.” Most who were interviewed said that informal rules or group norms have emerged. One subscriber described the norms as “fluid and unpublished.” A number of subscribers said they avoided violating any norms by “lurking” for a while before posting any messages. One subscriber said, “I read messages for a few weeks before posting the first time. I saw people get blistered.” Another said, “There are unspoken rules. You find them out by asking or you break the rules and get slammed or flamed. Some people drop out after being flamed or

ridiculed, but others don't." One subscriber compared learning the rules of k2k with "growing up." Another referred to the process as "hazing."

Occasionally, a moderator or another subscriber has attempted some codification by posting a message which lists "rules" such as signing one's name to messages, changing subject lines as needed, and sending personal rejoinders to individuals instead of to the entire group. One moderator suggested that perhaps the moderators should send a monthly message reminding subscribers of good "netiquette." Another moderator suggested that "rules" should be sent to new subscribers. Neither of these suggestions has been implemented.

Many subscribers indicated that there was a strong preference on k2k for signed messages. One moderator said, "Signing your name is a rule that emerged early." A subscriber said "Signing your name is strongly encouraged but not enforced." Another moderator said, "We don't insist people give their names—We can't really do that." Most subscribers agreed that this unwritten rule was unlikely to be strictly enforced, but as one subscriber noted, "If you start posting anonymously, people will ask 'who are you?'" Several subscribers noted that it was considered "OK" to omit use of one's last name "after a while." One subscriber asserted that the unofficial rule about signing names is enforced selectively. According to this subscriber, "If you post against the majority, you might get jumped on for not signing your name. If you're neutral or with the majority, you might not get called on it." Several subscribers are thought to use aliases. There have been some pointed references to the possibility that "Al Turner" and "V. Crandall" are the same person posting messages under two



different names. One subscriber congratulated Al/V. for having the audacity to get into a debate with him/herself at one point. One early subscriber who is a very active participant in the discussions confessed that he has two k2k accounts, one in his real name and one in another name. He indicated he has used the alias account on a few occasions when he wished to speak and feared retribution of a type that might affect his livelihood.

Another unwritten rule mentioned by a number of those interviewed was k2k's ban on partisan political activity. One moderator said, "Partisan politics was stamped out quickly because there's no consensus on that issue. Members are Republicans, Democrats, independents. We agree on things about downtown, but we vote differently in national elections." One subscriber disagreed that partisan politics are not allowed: "It's OK to post announcements about Democrats, liberals, and alternative lifestyles." A review of the messages reveals that a subscriber writing a message advocating one specific candidate is likely to be told that such messages are inappropriate. In response to messages proclaiming "Vote for Candidate X," the author is likely to be told that while such obvious campaigning is not allowed, subscribers are welcome to post messages describing candidates' views or explaining why one candidate is preferable to another one. One k2k moderator and a number of k2k subscribers were candidates in recent City Council primary elections. During these primary election campaigns in summer 2001, subscribers who attended candidate forums often posted messages summarizing the views of the different candidates. Some reports were straightforward; others included some editorializing.

A number of subscribers said, "The only rules are the rules of netiquette." These rules include several dos and don'ts: "Don't use CAPS, don't 'flame,' and don't waste bandwidth with 'atta boys.' Do use emoticons and do change the subject line." These rules are not much observed on k2k. While not many subscribers use all capital letters, some messages could be characterized as "flames," and there are many messages which could be said to waste bandwidth. One subscriber pointed out that the "The classic "atta boy" on k2k is 'Forsooth.'" A moderator observed that "the rule no one seems to follow is 'change the subject line.'" Following a thread of discussion at k2k is a Byzantine experience since very often the content of the message has no relationship to the subject line. One subscriber added that there's a rule against "proofreading." He pointed out that subscribers are expected to ignore each other's typos and writing errors. For the most part, the only proofreading evident on k2k is retrospective self-editing. Some writers cannot resist writing a follow up message to correct a typo in a previous message; however, most posters of messages appear able to resist this temptation.

### **Cohesiveness**

In the first few months of k2k's existence, especially as discussion focused on opposition to the Justice Center, use of the term "k2ker" began to appear, and some subscribers began to ask about representation of the group's position outside the group. November 9, 1999, in the first few days of the group's existence, a message was posted which asked "Should we be sending one letter as an organization, or many separate letters mentioning that each of us is part of

this organization?" (k2k #26). The response from another subscriber was "I think individual letters with no mention of the group are best" (k2k #33). That same day, another subscriber asked about the desirability of having the *Knoxville News-Sentinel* write an article about the group. The author of the message admitted this was "touchy... because we don't really have a clear idea yet what our priorities are and what we stand for, and where our limits are, although [emphasis added] *I think everyone is in general agreement on most things*" (k2k #40). Thus, subscribers opened debate on the question "Are we a group?" Ten messages were ultimately posted with the subject heading "What We Stand For." Other threads started with headings such as "Who are We?" and "A Couple of Things about the List." One subscriber noted, "Early on, we became perceived as the Anti-Jail group." In their position on that issue, subscribers seemed in unison. No messages were posted that favored the construction of the Justice Center. However, as was revealed at the January 24, 2000, County Commission meeting, there was at least one subscriber who made the group's messages available to the Sheriff's Department's Chief Deputy. One early subscriber said, "People who disagreed were listening in, which resulted in the 'evil binders.'"

Most of the original 40-60 subscribers knew one another or knew at least some of the other subscribers. An early subscriber said, "The early members were a social group who knew each other. To us, it's still social. There are people who joined k2k and then came to socialize. Many of the frequent posters know each other and are comfortable on a number of levels." As the group expanded, they made attempts to get to know one another and to be able to

identify each other in public. Weekly happy hour gatherings were announced with all subscribers urged to come. When “Mayor’s Night Out” was held at one of the group’s favorite gathering places, all k2k subscribers were urged to attend. When one subscriber wrote to ask if anyone had any name tags so that subscribers who did not know each other could meet at Mayor’s Night Out and match faces with names, another subscriber promised to bring some name tags. A subscriber brought her digital camera to the gathering and later posted photographs with names at the k2k site. In response to a subscriber’s suggestion that they all should write messages introducing themselves and explaining why they joined k2k, a number of subscribers wrote “profiles” of themselves. In messages in November and December, subscribers frequently mentioned having enjoyed meeting other subscribers at various gatherings. The president of City People issued an invitation for all k2k subscribers to attend that organization’s Christmas Party and later posted a message thanking many in the group for attending the party.

K2k experienced its peak of cohesion during its first weeks of existence. It is clear that there was a sense of camaraderie and common purpose among early subscribers. As word of the group spread, and subscribers appeared who did not socialize with the first group of subscribers, the nature of the group evolved. One early subscriber said, “At first it was a group because the first members were people who knew each other. When others joined, especially the mayor, things changed.” Early in its existence members considered the desirability of expanding the subscriber base. There were recruitment efforts,

notably through the cards Buzz Goss designed, and references were made to encouraging everyone in City People to join. On November 9, 1999, a subscriber asked about the group's feeling regarding "city officials, politicians, and civic and business representatives being invited to join" (k2k #30). To that question, a subscriber responded that "having people on the list from city or county government would produce a chilling effect on discussion" (k2k #35). This same writer also noted there was nothing to prevent posted messages from being "forwarded." Other subscribers quickly pointed out that anyone was welcome to join k2k. Not every subscriber agrees that the group's growth from under 100 members in its early days to over 700 members is a good thing. One subscriber said, "Now there are too many people." Another subscriber pointed out an impact of the growth: "The level of activity for most of the regulars is lower. Volume is a problem as membership has grown. People are writing shorter messages."

As the subscriber list continued to grow, the group lost cohesion. Many subscribers refer to a core group in k2k, what one called "the epicenter, the people who got k2k together." A public official who is not a subscriber but who regularly receives forwarded messages described the core group as "activist, young, liberal, urban, and whiny." He said "They complain a lot but don't offer too many suggestions" and theorized that "the core group and the expanded group are probably different." One subscriber who posts regularly but did not join the group until its second year of existence said, "The core who started k2k have different views from mine...mine are more in the mainstream. I don't run into

many people with views like those expressed by the majority on K2k.” One subscriber referred to a “hard core nucleus of regulars” and asserted that “lurkers are not part of the group.” Defining what constitutes the group k2k is complicated.

There are currently well over 700 subscribers. This number is of limited use, however, in determining the size of the group. Having a subscriber list of over 700 means only that over 700 people have subscribed to k2k and not subsequently "unsubscribed." Beyond that, it is difficult to tell how many persons can be said to comprise the group that has been designated as k2k. For one thing, some subscribers have multiple accounts, which inflates the number somewhat. In addition, it is evident that an undetermined number of people who subscribed at one time no longer read messages and can not fairly be said to be part of k2k simply because they have not unsubscribed. The k2k subscriber survey was Emailed to all Email addresses on the subscriber list, with obvious duplicates removed prior to the mailing. The survey was made available in this way so that persons who no longer read messages but who still used the Email address they used when they subscribed could participate in the survey. Since the population of k2k is difficult to count with any accuracy, it is difficult as well to determine the overall response rate to the subscriber survey. There were 197 responses from the approximately 700 persons who received the Emailed survey for a response rate of just under 30 percent. In keeping with the self-characterized "compulsive" Email behavior of many k2k regulars, 53 responses were received during the first 24 hours the survey was available.

It appears that the group, regardless of its size, encompasses several subgroups. One subscriber said, "There are groups within it. I have a group of friends in it." A number of subscribers referred to private discussion groups called "sidebars." These private groups were formed so that some k2k members, in addition to the moderators who have their own group, could have conversations in which all subscribers were not included. The only way to join a sidebar is to be informed of its existence, to apply for membership, and to be approved by the owner. Unlike k2k which was publicized widely and to which membership is almost never denied, the existence--and names--of the sidebar discussions is a closely guarded secret. In addition to this formal mechanism for conducting private conversations, it is widely known that a great deal of conversation takes place "offlist," meaning that instead of replying to a posted message, which means the response may be viewed by all subscribers, it is common practice to post some replies to the author of a posted message, which means only he or she receives the message. While private replies are urged for "attaboys" and other forms of private ripostes, the number of those types of messages visible on k2k each day suggests that private replies may be used for other purposes. In interviews, subscribers indicated that these private replies were often used to post responses that the author wanted to keep private not because the messages were a waste of "bandwidth" but because the author wished, for whatever reason, to keep the response confidential.

The feeling that "lurkers" are not really part of the group runs strongly in some of the frequent posters who were interviewed. During the discussion

surrounding the proposed survey of k2k subscribers, a number of subscribers who participated in the discussion expressed surprise that this researcher intended not only to include lurkers in the survey but actively to encourage their participation in the survey. However, if one excludes the lurkers from the group, k2k becomes a much smaller group than the frequently mentioned 700 plus. Almost everyone who was interviewed referred to a “core group”; however, sometimes the core group was defined as the early subscribers and sometimes the core group was defined as those who post messages frequently. Another subscriber defined the core group as subscribers who read the messages: “A k2ker is someone familiar with what’s posted. There’s a common bond. It’s like a country store in cyberspace.” Another described it as a “continuous cocktail party.” Several who were interviewed used the metaphor of the “coffee house.”

Many, including the founder Buzz Goss and the current owner Steve Dupree, have continued to insist that k2k is not a group and that there is no k2k position on anything. A subscriber who took part in the early debates said, “With k2k there is no position, no ideology. It was not intended to be a group. It is a forum for exchanging ideas, so it’s a group in the sense that it attracts some people with common views.” One subscriber pointed out that “the internet helps people with common interests find each other.” Another subscriber described “a k2k person”:

The majority who post have enthusiasm for downtown Knoxville and for downtowns in general. They have a belief in the community that exists outside work and home life. They are a well-educated group. The most active participants have college degrees or advanced degrees.



One subscriber interviewed expressed the belief that k2k was more heterogeneous than other groups. One public official who was interviewed cautioned that while k2k represents a facet of public opinion, perhaps it should not be treated as though it represents "broad" public opinion.

### **Use of Technology**

Technology is an essential element of k2k since it exists on the Internet. There is a social element of k2k which exists offline, but, for the most part, computer technology is the basic element of k2k. Only individuals with access to a computer, an Email account, and the Internet can participate in the discussion. Most of the subscribers who were interviewed exhibited a high degree of electronic savvy. Many of those interviewed obviously possessed cell phones, laptop computers, and hand held computers. Subscribers' practice of including links to articles and sites of interest in messages indicates they spend time browsing on the Internet. There is a high volume of messages posted by k2k subscribers. In the first 24 months of the group's existence, subscribers posted over 25,000 messages. The number of messages per month ranges from a low of 317 messages in November 1999, the first month of the group's existence, to a high of 1612 messages in May 2000. The monthly average is 1053 posts; the daily average is 35 messages. Sometimes 3-4 messages in a row are posted from the same person.

K2k is one of thousands of groups located at the Yahoo Groups website. It is impossible to count the number of groups, but there are 916,672 moderators listed in the Yahoo Group's Moderators List. Groups are classified into various

sections such as “Health and Wellness,” “Business and Finance,” and “Romance and Relationships.” K2k’s classification is “Regional,” and its category is “Tennessee.” The range of groups is very broad. A group of motorcycle enthusiasts called “In the Wind” has 3775 members, a surfing group called “Woodies” has 199 members, and a group existing solely for the purpose of showcasing periodic postings from a woman identified only as “Midge” has 777 members. K2k appears unique in its purpose. There are some civic-oriented discussion boards at Yahoo Groups and elsewhere, but they are sponsored by entities such as municipalities or social or civic organizations that exist offline as well as in cyberspace.

K2k was originally situated at E-Groups. In November 1999, just after k2k was originated, E-Groups merged with OneList, with the merged entity retaining the name E-groups. That move did not apparently affect k2k though it may have affected groups who subscribed at OneList. In June 2000 E-Groups joined Yahoo Groups, which resulted in some changes at the k2k site. Members’ accounts were transferred seamlessly so that most did not have to do anything differently to stay subscribed. Those who read messages at the website were required to use a different URL to locate the group. The Yahoo Groups’ set-up is somewhat different from the one at E-Groups. More information about the group was available at E-groups. For example, the E-Groups website provided the average number of posts and listed the top 10 posters of messages. However, generally, little changed that affected most subscribers. During interviews, several moderators expressed their belief that the move from Yahoo Groups had

caused problems for many subscribers. However, most respondents to the survey did not indicate any major problems with the change in services. Only five percent indicated the change had caused “big problems” for them. Several moderators expressed the desire someday to make the group independent of any service such as Yahoo Groups.

The service available at Yahoo Groups has led to the creation of k2k “offshoots.” See Table 3.2. “k2k Offshoots at Yahoo Groups.” Two of these, k2k Transportation and k2k Wireless, were created so that discussions could be had on these topics without the necessity of linking discussion to downtown Knoxville. K2k Transportation, formed May 1, 2000, has 76 subscribers who have posted 391 messages as of October 2001. Its owner is Buzz Goss, founder of K2k, and two of its moderators are Steve Dupree, current k2k owner, and Brent Minchey, a k2k moderator. Minchey is the owner of K2k Wireless, which was formed September 25, 2001, and has 10 members. The latest k2k offshoot is called K2k Concise. Formed June 26, 2001, this site is not yet functional. Dupree described the planned operations of the group. Only K2k subscribers will be permitted to join, and only the owner/moderators may post messages. The plan is for moderators to select no more than 10 messages that were posted on any given day and to post those at k2k Concise. Moderators are still determining exactly how this will work and how the posts will be selected. Some sort of rating scale has been proposed. Another k2k site is not an official k2k site. K2k Oakwood Lincoln Park is a neighborhood site that has never taken off. Founded July 6, 2000, it has 4 members and has posted 3 messages—one each in July

2001, July 2000, and August 2000. Like a ghost mining town in the old west, k2k Oakwood Lincoln Park sits abandoned at Yahoo Groups. Several of k2k's moderators expressed their hopes that one day there would be neighborhood k2ks all over Knoxville. One advantage to such a network, according to one moderator, is that neighborhood-specific information, such as announcements of candidate forums in different neighborhoods, could be removed from k2k, allowing it to focus more specifically on downtown Knoxville.

Being a subscriber to k2k requires facility with the system in place at Yahoo Groups. Subscribers have three options for reading k2k messages: receiving all Email messages as they are posted, receiving a daily digest of all posted messages, and logging on to the k2k homepage at Yahoo Groups and reading messages. Each option has advantages according to those who have chosen each. Some subscribers prefer the immediacy of receiving the messages as they are written. One subscriber said he has two computers in his office, one of which is used to stay logged onto his Email account all day and keep up with k2k messages. Instead of coffee breaks, he takes "k2k breaks." Others prefer the daily digest because they like the convenience of receiving every message, organized by thread, once a day. Others prefer reading the messages at the website, an option which gives the subscriber control over when he or she reads the messages. This option also allows the subscriber access to all messages, not just the ones posted in a given day. A number of messages in the early months of k2k described the three options and gave directions for selecting the desired one. Occasionally, some hapless individual has somehow

ended up on the subscriber list, apparently against his or her will, and has responded with fervent pleas along the lines of “Help me! Please take me off this list before I lose my mind! Stop sending me Email!” The response from k2k subscribers is generally a scornful one, indicating their disbelief that this individual does not know how to “unsubscribe.”

During the five day period in December 1999-January 2000 when at least 15 subscribers took part in proposing and revising drafts of the petition in opposition to the Justice Center, most displayed a great deal of facility in sharing and downloading documents. There were discussions of the various formats (Word document, text file, pdf file) that could be used to make the petition available in the most convenient way for those who wished to download it. Subscribers are not committed to doing everything online. When a subscriber proposed that online petitions would be efficient and effective, several other subscribers pointed out problems inherent with online petition drives. One subscriber asserted that “electronic signatures are meaningless” (k2k #1048). During this same period, when one subscriber said she needed more k2k cards to give out, Buzz Goss responded that he had made the cards available in a digital file so that anyone could have access to the cards as needed.

Often, the discussion on k2k indicates the opinions of subscribers regarding technology. Several times during k2k’s existence, there have been conversations regarding the feasibility of online voting with many subscribers expressing the belief that if the Internet is secure enough for commerce, it is secure enough for voting. As k2k subscribers sought to contact officials during

the campaign in opposition to the Justice Center, several expressed scorn for those who did not use Email. During City Council primary races in summer 2001, there was discussion of various candidates' willingness to use technology as a resource for involving the public. Admiration was expressed for candidates who erected websites and who used Email as a major means of communication. There have been discussions regarding the desirability of online courses in K-12 education and of the need for all students to have access to computers.

### **Conclusion**

In the first two years of its existence, k2k grew from a small discussion group formed by and for a group of friends into a significant political presence. Growing through word of mouth augmented by some publicity, k2k's subscriber base increased from its initial size of around 50 persons to several hundred subscribers within a year. The expanded conversation desired by the founders and early subscribers grew beyond their expectations. Within a short period, the forum was a gathering place for not only those who came to discuss issues related to downtown Knoxville but also for those who wished to monitor the thoughts and activities of the participants for a variety of reasons. Lurkers and infrequent posters range from people curious about the issues to media figures seeking tips for stories to policy makers gauging support for positions and actions.

The role k2k played in the defeat of the Justice Center was clearly a factor in the group's heightened public profile. While other factors do appear to have come into play in the defeat of that project, no one disputes that k2k subscribers

had a significant impact in that situation. That early visible success did much to increase the subscriber base and to lend a certain mystique to the group.

Foremost, it established the group *as a group* of sorts, and it established the group's potential to have an impact in other policy areas. This early success, however, has not been duplicated in other situations.

With the Justice Center, there was a great deal of unanimity among subscribers. Opposition to the project was visible and vehement. The group operated at the center of a movement, serving as a communication tool, a meeting place, a mobilizing force, and an organizing base. The dynamics of an unpopular project, a newly mobilized group, and the speed of the Internet came together in a rather spectacular fashion. Later political issues did not coalesce in the same way. It appears that when there is disagreement on the issues among subscribers, k2k does not emerge as a group force. Instead, in those instances, the forum serves as a place of debate but no action. Some individual subscribers may be moved to take action regarding an issue, but the group itself does not act as a catalyst for the action.

K2k's stated purpose is quite broad: "to facilitate discussion about the future of [Knoxville] with particular emphasis on issues related to downtown" ([www.groups.yahoo/groups/k2k](http://www.groups.yahoo/groups/k2k)). This broad goal or purpose is too diffuse to, of itself, motivate anything beyond discussion. Moving beyond discussion to action seems likeliest to occur when there is broad-based consensus among subscribers on a controversial issue. The Justice Center proved to be such an

issue. Currently, the situation surrounding the Sprankle Building in downtown Knoxville has the potential to raise the level of activism of the group.

The Sprankle Building was purchased by a local bank for expansion purposes. When circumstances changed, and the building was no longer desirable for the original purpose, the bank determined that it would raze the building and construct a parking lot. Apart from the obvious dissimilarity—one project involved constructing a building; the other involves tearing one down—the projects and the positions of k2k's subscribers do share certain similarities. As with the Justice Center, the issue began with discussion among k2k subscribers regarding the situation. In addition, tearing down buildings and replacing them with parking lots has popular appeal on a par with building a jail. These are not things many citizens conceivably rally for. On the other hand, the opposite causes—defeating the jail or saving the building--have much more general appeal. At one time, as with the construction of the Justice Center, the demolition of the Sprankle Building seemed a foregone conclusion. As of this writing, that may not be true. While the Sprankle Building has not dominated k2k bandwidth to the degree that the Justice Center did, forces dedicated to preserving the building appear to be growing on k2k, and a petition drive has been mounted. One of the petitions is being kept at a downtown locale frequented by a number of k2k's early subscribers and frequent posters. Thus, the petition drive to save the Sprankle Building appears to have the same potential as did the petition drive against the Justice Center to become publicly identified as a k2k project.



In the absence of a very specific, universally approved goal, k2k, in most respects appears less like a traditional group and more like something different—a kind of group, yes, but one with different properties than traditional groups. K2k does exhibit the features posited for cybergroups. Leadership is informal and ad hoc. There are opinion leaders, but these change with the topic and also over time. The conversation tends to be freewheeling with no management and no restriction save self-imposed ones. Rules are unpublished and subject to change. Enforcement of even the simplest rules of netiquette is lax. It is possible to draw sanctions, but these are reserved for behavior widely perceived as obnoxious and obstreperous. Goal focus is diffuse and broad. Scrolling through the messages at the k2k discussion board at yahoo groups is like strolling through a coffee shop or a cocktail party, listening to conversations on a wide range of subjects. In any given day, there may be a dozen or more topics of discussion on k2k, many of which do not appear to be all that closely related to one another. K2k exhibits low levels of cohesion overall. A popular project can create some short-lived cohesion, and there are moments of camaraderie, especially among subgroups of the k2k population. Those who meet each other offline at social gatherings or at public meetings have a different experience as k2k subscribers than those whose sole interaction with other subscribers is through the keyboard and the monitor. Most k2k subscribers, as might be expected of participants in an internet-based discussion forum, exhibit a high degree of comfort with technology. However, there is an important face-to-face dynamic which exists among some subscribers. This social engagement is an

important underpinning to the online interaction for these subscribers. It is at the intersection of the online interaction and the offline interaction where the highest potential for civic engagement exists.

As long as subscribers are limited to discussion, the engagement is limited as well. Certainly there is value in public dialogue, and the dialogue is a crucial component of the cybergroup. However, for a cybergroup to serve as an antidote to civic disengagement, the participants must move beyond electronic discourse into the realm of action. In December 1999 and January 2000, k2k's subscribers were engaged in civic activity. A significant amount of this activity took place online, but these online activities supported and mobilized offline activity that ultimately contributed to the group's playing a significant role in defeating the Justice Center and becoming known as an important force in local politics.

The act of one human being writing to another human being is not traditionally considered a public act. When the communication is published, the act becomes public. When the communication is shared instantaneously with hundreds of people in an electronic discussion forum, the interaction takes place in a public sphere. Those who participate are engaged with one another in a public space. While public discourse may be said to have intrinsic value, civic engagement occurs when that discourse prompts further action and interaction.

## **Chapter 4: Evaluating the Performance and Impact of k2k**

### **Introduction**

In this chapter the findings based on the extensive survey of k2k participants are reported. After reporting the basic findings of the survey, some of these results are compared to a private telephone survey of Knox County residents. Applying the analytic model of participation impact, the results of multiple regression analysis are reported to determine the impact of k2k participation upon individuals, the group, and the community. The chapter closes with conclusions based on these findings.

### **Findings**

#### **Rating k2k Success**

Several survey questions addressed k2k's success at meeting these goals. Question 1 asked about k2k's success at meeting its stated purpose. The majority of respondents rated k2k as either "Excellent" or "Good" at meeting its stated purpose. This is clearly shown in Table 4.1.

Questions 2-3 asked about k2k's success at increasing knowledge and participation. As is shown in Table 4.2, 87 percent of respondents said that k2k had increased their knowledge of local politics more than "A Little." Not as many attributed increased participation to k2k, but slightly more than half of the respondents believed that their participation in local politics had increased as a result of their participation in k2k.

Finally, question 4 asked about k2k's impact on local politics. As can be seen in Table 4.3, most respondents felt k2k has had some impact locally.

### **Participant Motivation and Goals**

In addition to rating k2k's success at meeting its goals, k2k subscribers taking the survey were asked about their goals for joining the group and whether those goals were being met—these results are found in Table 4.4. When asked to explain why they initially subscribed to k2k and why they continued to subscribe, respondents indicated a variety of reasons came into play. Curiosity and the desire for entertainment or for interaction with others did not emerge as major reasons for joining or for remaining although 80 percent said curiosity played some role in their subscribing. The most common reasons respondents gave for subscribing and for remaining as subscribers were interest in k2k's stated purpose and the desire to increase their access to information.

From where are k2k participants drawn? Anyone with an Email address can join and participate. There is no *residency* requirement, so participants are drawn from a wider area than the city of Knoxville--as is shown in Table 4.5. For the period under study, the primary focus of the discussion was downtown Knoxville and city politics. Not surprisingly then, just over two-thirds of k2k participants live inside the city limits. And, nine out of ten reside within Knox County. Thus as one would expect given the focus of its discussion and activities, k2k clearly is a *local* cyberassociation with a few participants being drawn from a wider area.

## **Participation Levels**

In Table 4.6 the posting frequency of participants is reported. The k2k subscriber survey was Emailed to all Email addresses on the subscriber list, with obvious duplicates removed prior to the mailing. The survey was made available in this way so that persons who no longer read messages but who still used the Email address they used when they subscribed could participate in the survey. Thirteen percent of respondents said they either hardly ever or never read messages. Forty-six percent said they read messages once a day or more. Thus, some of the respondents could be characterized as those who simply have not unsubscribed. In response to another question, 21 percent of respondents said that not having unsubscribed is either a major or a minor reason they continue to be listed as subscribers. Since the population of k2k is difficult to count with any accuracy, it is difficult as well to determine the overall response rate to the subscriber survey. There were 197 responses from the approximately 700 persons who received the Emailed survey for a response rate of just under 30 percent. In keeping with the self-characterized "compulsive" Email behavior of many k2k regulars, 53 responses were received during the first 24 hours the survey was available.

During the discussion surrounding the proposed survey of k2k subscribers, a number of subscribers who participated in the discussion expressed surprise that this researcher intended not only to include lurkers in the survey but actively to encourage their participation in the survey. However, if one

excludes the lurkers from the group, k2k becomes a much smaller group than the 700 plus number frequently mentioned in k2k discussions. Only nine percent of the subscribers who responded to the survey describe themselves as posting “frequently.” Thirty-seven percent of those who responded have never posted a message.

Almost everyone who was interviewed referred to a “core group”; however, sometimes the core group was defined as the early subscribers, and sometimes the core group was defined as those who post messages frequently. Interestingly, the results of the survey indicate that these may be the same people, that the subscribers who post most frequently are the subscribers who joined k2k in the first months. Table 4.6 reveals that 78 percent of those who post messages frequently joined k2k *prior* to April 2000. In contrast, only 6 percent of those who post frequently joined later, between January 2001-April 2001.

The survey results also indicate a connection between posting messages frequently and reading messages frequently. This is apparent in Table 4.7. Those who described themselves as reading k2k messages either constantly or several times daily constituted 72 percent of the frequent posters.

Subscribers who post messages frequently exhibit different characteristics than those who post messages only occasionally and those who never post messages. One subscriber who was interviewed theorized that women were drawn to k2k because of their exclusion from local “power forums” and positions of authority. Posting frequency by sex is shown in Table 4.8. However, males

are the dominant sex on k2k. Not only were 62 percent of the survey respondents male, but 78 percent of those who described themselves as posting messages *frequently* were male.

Subscribers who post messages frequently live in different residential areas than those who post occasionally and those who never post messages. This is readily apparent in Table 4.9. Of those who say they *frequently* post messages, 94 percent said they live *inside* the city of Knoxville. Proximity to downtown Knoxville also proved important. Table 4.10 shows that forty-three percent of those who say they post messages frequently live in County Commission District One, with 21 percent living in Commission District Nine. Both of these districts include or are close to downtown Knoxville.

Those who post messages--either frequently or occasionally--indicate a different *political ideology* than those who never post. Posting frequency is cross tabulated with ideology in Table 4.11. Of those who described themselves as posting frequently, 41 percent labeled themselves as liberal; of those who described themselves as posting occasionally, 46 percent labeled themselves as liberal; of those who described themselves as never posting, 28 percent labeled themselves as liberal.

An area where little difference was noted with regard to frequent posting was level of education, as is apparent in Table 4.12. Those who post messages, either frequently or occasionally and those who never post messages possess similar levels of education.

## **k2k Assessments**

Subscribers who post messages frequently view k2k differently than those who *never* post messages. Those who post messages either frequently or occasionally were more likely to rate k2k as excellent at meeting its stated purpose. This is clear from the frequencies reported in Table 4.13. Of those who said they never posted messages, 28 percent rated k2k as excellent at meeting its purpose; in contrast, 61 percent of those who post frequently rated k2k as excellent at meeting its purpose.

Similarly, respondents who said they never posted messages tended to assess k2k's impact on local politics at a lower level. This is shown in Table 4.14. Of those who never posted messages, 18 percent rated k2k as having a *great deal* of impact on local politics.

Striking differences were observed in the way those who posted *frequently* and those who *never* posted rated k2k's impact on their personal knowledge of politics and their personal participation in politics. Of those who post frequently, 89 percent said k2k had increased their knowledge of local politics. The relationship between posting frequency and knowledge is presented in Table 4.15. Those who posted occasionally also indicated k2k had increased their knowledge a great deal. Those who never posted messages were more likely to indicate that k2k had increased their knowledge only somewhat.

The most dramatic difference was evident when respondents were asked to assess k2k's impact on their participation in politics. Of those who posted messages frequently, as Table 4.16 shows, almost three-quarters indicated that



their participation in k2k had increased their participation a great deal. However, of those who never posted, only eight percent indicated any connection between k2k and an increase in their political participation, and 50 percent of this group said k2k had not had *any* impact on their participation. This is a clear indication that participation has the cumulative effective posited in the hierarchical model—one form of activity does appear to lead to or promote another.

This is further confirmed in Table 4.17. Subscribers who post messages *frequently* are more likely to share messages with non-subscribers than are those who *never* post messages. Ninety-four percent of those who said they post messages frequently indicated they shared messages with others; 76 percent of those who post occasionally said they shared messages; and 56 percent of those who never post messages said they shared messages with others. These responses indicate that messages posted on k2k, a private forum, might be considered public communication given the substantial likelihood that a message will be forwarded to someone who is not a subscriber. The fact that those who post frequently are more likely to forward messages may be another facet of the tendency of the subscribers who post most frequently to dominate the discourse. This group, most of whom joined the group prior to April 2000, appear to post, read, and forward messages at a level indicating k2k consumes a significant amount of their time and energy. In any event, once again the cumulative and hierarchical nature of participation is apparent.

## **Demographics and k2k: The Knox County Survey**

If k2k is not a group but instead a cross section of subscribers representing diverse perspectives and backgrounds, one might expect that its subscriber demographics would resemble Knox County citizen demographics fairly closely. This is tested in Table 4.18, which reports the results of a private phone survey conducted in Knox County during June 2001, approximately the same period as when k2k subscribers were surveyed. This table shows some demographic differences between the k2k respondents and the respondents to the other survey. Larger numbers of k2k subscribers are in the 31-40 age group with almost no subscribers in the 61-70 and over 70 age groups which comprise 27 percent of the Knox County respondents. Thus, k2k subscribers appear to be younger than the general population.

In addition, levels of education among k2k subscribers are higher than the same figures for the respondents to the Knox County survey. In particular, as is arrayed in Table 4.19, whereas 52 percent of k2k respondents have post-graduate education beyond the bachelor's degree, the same is true for only 18 percent of the Knox County respondents.

Differences also emerge regarding the sex of k2k respondents contrasted with the other group of respondents. The ratio of males to females is roughly even in Knox County. However, many more males (62 percent) than females (38 percent) responded to the k2k survey.

Using the same survey results as a basis for comparison, k2k subscribers' responses indicate that they are not representative of Knox County in their

political party affiliation and in their political ideology. These results are produced in Table 4.20. While the percentage labeling themselves Independents is fairly close, the percentage labeling themselves Democrats and Republicans is almost reversed.

In Table 4.21 we further observe that while the percentage labeling themselves Moderates is fairly close once again, the percentage labeling themselves Liberals and Conservatives is almost exactly reversed. These results indicate that the majority of k2k subscribers may be more liberal than the general population of Knox County.

These comparisons reveal that k2k participants are distinctive from their counterparts in Knox County. This suggests a tendency for cybergroups, as is true for other forms of political groups, to draw membership from salient elements of the larger population. These results show cybergroup participants to be younger, better educated, and more liberal in their political orientation.

### **Regression Results**

The results of applying the Model of Participation Impact presented in Chapter 2 are presented in Figure 4.1. This model casts the evaluation of k2k as a function of the degree to which respondents feel that k2k increases their knowledge, participation in, and impact upon local government, along with the educational level of the respondent. The model also recognized a social connection component to participation in k2k. Those who are single are more likely to feel that k2k increases both their knowledge and participation in local

politics, but not necessarily their impact on politics. Clearly the perceived value of k2k to its respondents is largely a product of the perception that it increases their knowledge of local politics. However feelings that k2k increases participation and has an impact upon local politics also lead to positive evaluations of the k2k experience. Finally increased education levels correspond to a positive k2k experience.

### **Conclusion**

In general, many respondents to the k2k subscriber survey expressed the belief that their participation in k2k has increased their knowledge of and participation in local politics. The desire for knowledge emerged as a primary concern. Along with interest in the stated purpose of the group, the desire for increased access to information was the main reason most respondents gave for both subscribing to the group and remaining as a subscriber. While part of the allure of a cybergroup is its capability of facilitating interaction among persons in diverse geographic areas, k2k is very much a local cybergroup. The majority of subscribers reside in Knox County with a substantial number of them residing within the city limits of Knoxville. However, while k2k subscribers reside in just about every area of the city and county, subscribers are a subset rather than a cross section of the general population. There are several ways in which k2k subscribers who responded to the survey are not representative of the general population. K2k subscribers appear to be younger, more liberal, and more well-educated than the general populace.

K2k is not a homogeneous group. There appear to be subsets within the group. One division is that between the frequent posters and the lurkers. Some interesting patterns emerged between the two groups. The frequent posters also tended to be early subscribers, those who have been referred to as the “core group.” In addition, those who post frequently are more likely to read messages more frequently and also to share messages with non-subscribers. Participation in k2k appears to occupy a position of central importance in the lives of these persons. Just as k2k survey respondents exhibited some key differences when contrasted with the general population of the area, so k2k’s most frequent posters appear to be different from those who are less active or inactive subscribers. Males are overrepresented in this subgroup, which also tends to be more liberal than other subscribers. Furthermore, this subgroup is highly satisfied with the k2k experience.

There are two reasons for the high level of satisfaction among this group. First, they believe that their participation in k2k has increased their knowledge of local politics, which they have, in response to other questions, indicated is their main reason for both joining k2k and remaining a member of k2k. Second, they believe their participation in k2k has increased their participation in local politics and that k2k has had an impact on local politics. This connection between their own increased participation and the perceived local impact of k2k results in higher levels of political efficacy and a positive evaluation of the k2k experience.

The most active participants in the cybergroup subscribed to k2k because they desired civic engagement. They joined the group because they wanted to

be informed citizens. The resultant greater levels of knowledge and awareness led to increased activity and participation, reinforcing the cumulative nature of the participative hierarchy. Most of them appear to have moved beyond *spectator* activities such as exposure to civic stimuli to *transitional* activities prior to joining the cybergroup. After subscribing to k2k, many members of this subgroup not only engaged in dialogue on the cybergroup (the lowest level transitional activity) but also contacted public officials, made monetary contributions, and attended public meetings. A significant number of them subsequently participated in *gladiator* activities such as contributing time to a campaign, becoming an active and identifiable member of the cybergroup, attending strategy meetings, soliciting funds or attendance, and organizing or maintaining k2k activity. In addition, a few either sought public or associational offices or were closely allied with others who did so. It seems clear that *active* participation in a cybergroup may contribute to increased civic activity and engagement.

Exposing oneself to civic stimuli by joining a cybergroup requires more initiative than exposing oneself to political stimuli as Milbrath conceived of it. Milbrath's spectator activities are essentially passive; subscribing to a cybergroup requires a certain level of initiative in that one is required to take several steps in order to fulfill the requirements of membership. Once a subscriber, one may be completely inactive and disengaged by virtue of not taking the steps involved in "unsubscribing" to the group, but the initial act is unlikely to be undertaken unless the individual has a certain level of interest in participating in dialogue with others—at least as a listener.

One commonality among k2k subscribers—both frequent posters and lurkers—is a higher level of education than the population in general. Since higher levels of education are generally associated with higher levels of political participation, it may not be surprising that those drawn to a cybergroup formed to facilitate civic discussion would be highly educated. However, levels of civic participation have fallen in recent decades even among those with higher levels of education. It may be that participation in a cybergroup has the potential to raise the level of civic engagement of educated but currently disengaged persons.

## Chapter 5: Cycles of Association in Public Space

### Summary

The thesis of this work is that *the world wide web (cyberspace) is a new form of public space in which citizens can engage in civic participation through on-line associations*. The purpose of this study was to test this thesis through the systematic investigation of the citizen's cyberassociation k2k from its inception in 1999 to 2001. Adapting the participation model of Lester Milbrath and focusing on the defining aspects of traditional interest groups to frame the inquiry, it was found through intensive personal interviews and an extensive survey that citizen participation in k2k constituted a variety of forms of civic participation and promoted the formation of an identifiable and engaged group with appreciable influence in civic affairs. To be sure, while the emergence of cyberspace as public space is no panacea for the ills of democracy in America, it is clearly a potential antidote to counter the more virulent dimensions of civic disengagement in the United States.

More specifically, this research found that in the first two years of its existence, k2k grew from a small discussion group formed by and for a group of friends into a significant political presence. The role k2k played in the defeat of the Justice Center was clearly a factor in the group's heightened public profile. This early, visible success did much to increase the subscriber base and to lend a certain mystique to the group. However, while the group's potential to have an impact in other policy areas has been demonstrated, it has not duplicated that success in other situations. When examined in five key areas associated with



group effectiveness, k2k is found to have minimal leadership, diffuse goal focus, little cohesiveness, and few rules and procedures. Given the nature of the group as a *cybergroup*, it rates highly in its use of technology. The majority of k2k subscribers responding to a membership survey indicated their satisfaction with the group. They believe participation in k2k has increased their knowledge of and participation in local politics, and they believe the group has had an impact on local politics. K2k subscribers do not appear to be representative of the general local population. They are, on the whole, younger, more liberal, and more well-educated than the general populace. Those who are most invested in k2k—those who read and post messages frequently—exhibit the highest level of satisfaction with the group, a finding which appears to be linked to their own increased participation and to their perception regarding the local impact of k2k.

### **Conclusions**

A number of conclusions are warranted from the study's findings. First, in the absence of a very specific, universally approved goal, k2k, in most respects, appears less like a traditional group and more like something completely different—a cybergroup with different properties than traditional groups.

Offline interaction is an important aspect of the group to many of its most active participants, and it is at the intersection of online and offline interaction that the highest potential for civic engagement exists. Furthermore, for a cybergroup to serve as an antidote to civic disengagement, the participants must move beyond electronic discourse into the realm of action. While public discourse has

intrinsic value, civic engagement occurs when discourse prompts further action and interaction. The most active participants in k2k joined the group because they desired civic engagement. Their participation in the cybergroup increased both their level of engagement and level of participation. Thus, it seems clear that *active* participation in a cybergroup may contribute to increased civic activity and engagement.

Overall, it is concluded that the Milbrath model of political participation remains viable in the cyber age, albeit subject to specific adjustments accommodating a broader notion of citizen participation in civic affairs. It provided an excellent framework for the present study. It is clear that cyber-participation is more open, democratic, volatile, and malleable than conventional participation, but it does adhere to the notion of a cumulative hierarchy of activities. Moreover, the potential for a wide variety of temporary and more permanent associations is apparent. In the k2k case, the cybergroup obviously “morphed” over time and this enhanced its attractiveness and long-term potential as a vehicle for local civic engagement.

### **Implications**

Several implications arise from these conclusions. First, cyberspace *is* a viable dimension of public space. Moreover, if, as we expect, cybergroups proliferate, the importance of this form of civic engagement will likely *increase* dramatically. This might well transform local politics as government officials are drawn into and become comfortable with engaging in the cyberdialogue. As

cybergroups mature and participants gain experience, the nature and impact of such associations will likely shift as well. Will this change render cybergroups more like traditional groups? The existence of these groups as “virtual” associations, reinforced by the spontaneous emergence of participants who regularly meet face-to-face raises the intriguing question of whether, over time, cybergroups will lose their distinctive qualities as open, non-hierarchical, highly democratic organizations. Robert Michel’s classic study of political parties established the oligarchial tendencies of organizations in modern democracies, even those which were the most democratic in their origins and ideologies. It is too early to tell, but cyberassociations offer at least the potential that these groups might well escape Michel’s famous “Iron Law of Oligarchy.” However, the references to a “k2k orthodoxy” among survey respondents and interviewees also raises the possibility that cybergroups will exhibit the same oligarchial tendencies as other types of groups.

### **Further Research**

Several opportunities for further research are evident from these implications. First, there is a need to expand the study to other local, regional, and national cybergroups of different origins and types. In many respects, k2k appears to be unique. If so, it would be valuable to learn more about the circumstances and environment which contributed to its origin and development and to study whether these conditions are replicable. Is k2k a prototype of other potentially emerging groups? Will we see the emergence of other such groups in Knox County or in other parts of the country and the world? What factors

contribute to the emergence of such groups? Can these factors be identified and used predictively?

In addition, regardless of whether k2k is unique in many respects, it still exists in that universe of associations known as cybergroups. As such, it is important to learn more about these associations. At present, very little study has been done regarding the origin, classification, behavior, and impact of cybergroups. While such research was beyond the scope of this study, these groups offer a rich field for scholars. In particular, given the open, democratic nature of cybergroups, the likelihood of their retaining this level of democracy raises some questions. In particular, we may ask the following: Will these groups confirm or deny Michel's "Iron Law of Oligarchy"?

In addition, there is a need to compare local, regional, and national cybergroups to traditional groups. While such research was beyond the scope of this study, it is important to determine the ways in which cybergroups are similar to and different from traditional groups. Current explanations of group behavior and impact do not consider this newest type of group. Will differences between the two types of groups result in the need to develop new theories of group formation and behavior? What are the features and dimensions of the term *group* as it used to denote a cybergroup? This study has examined five features—leadership, goal focus, organization complexity, cohesiveness, and use of technology. Further research is needed into those aspects of group operation as well as into other aspects of groups.

Finally, additional research is needed in order to determine the degree to which participation in a cybergroup may increase the civic engagement of participants. It will be important to determine whether these groups attract those persons who are already most likely to become engaged in civic affairs, thus augmenting activities in which they already engage, such as voting, attending meetings and rallies, contributing to causes and candidates, and engaging in political campaigns. There is some evidence that participation in a cybergroup can not only supplement other political activity but also increase the level and intensity of it. What remains to be seen is whether passive citizens might be attracted to cybergroups and through that activity encouraged to become actively involved with others in such a way as to lead to their increased civic engagement and participation. If subscribing to a cybergroup can serve as the impetus for passive citizens to become engaged in their communities, then these groups can indeed play a crucial role for society.

Participation in a cybergroup by reading and posting messages is a solitary activity. How much human connection is possible with this form of communication? While participation in a cybergroup may have the potential to serve as one antidote to civic disengagement, there is also the possibility that the proliferation of these groups could increase alienation and disengagement. Thus, it seems clear that an offline component is important if citizens are to become more rather than less engaged. Otherwise, it may be that we are not only bowling alone, as Robert Putnam has said, but *typing alone* as well.

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## **APPENDICES**

## **APPENDIX A: FIGURES**



Figure 1.1. Milbrath's Hierarchy of Political Involvement  
Adapted from Milbrath, Lester. 1965. *Political Participation*.  
Chicago: Rand McNally.

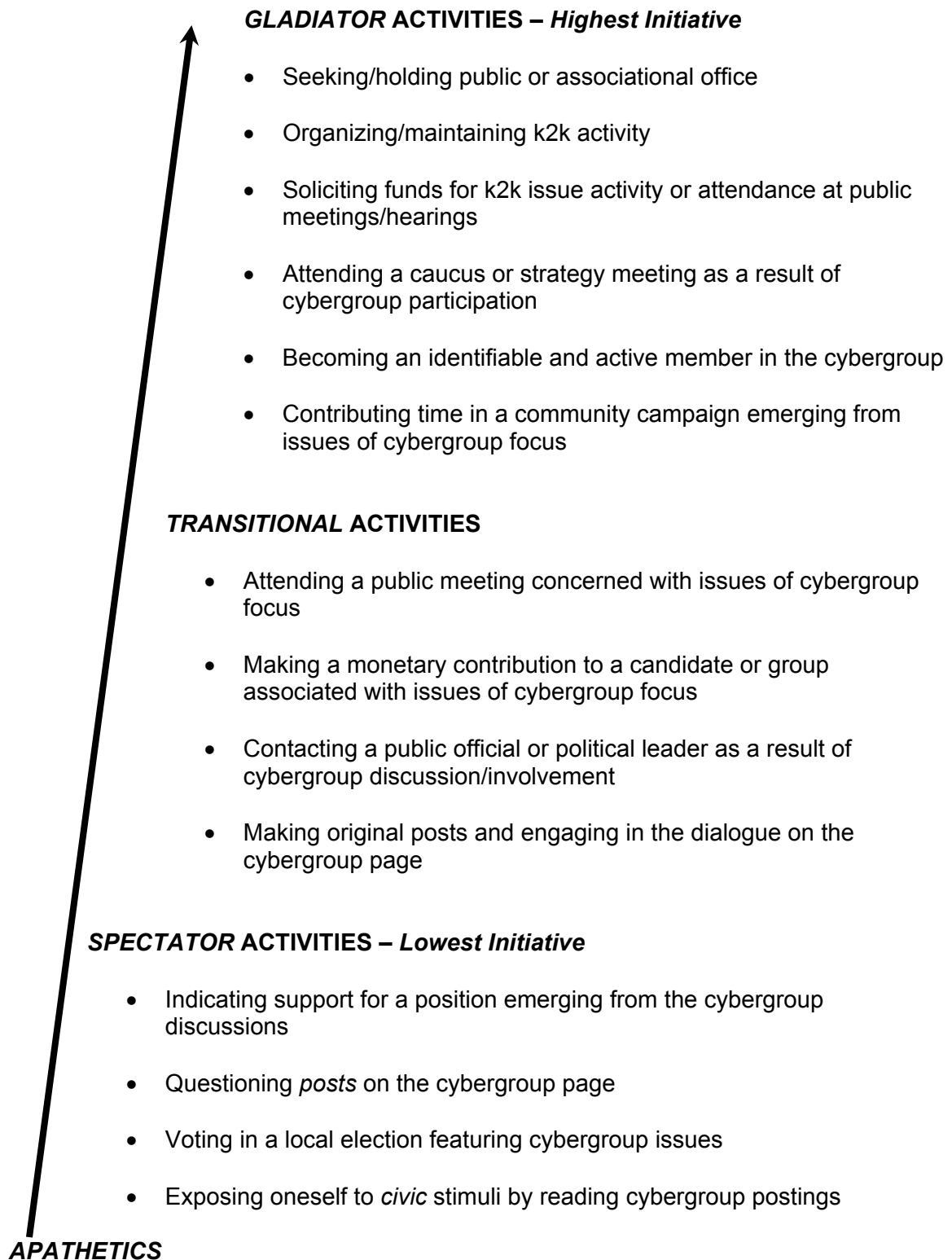


Figure 2.1. Milbrath's Hierarchy in the Cyberage  
Adapted from Milbrath, Lester. 1965. *Political Participation*.  
Chicago: Rand McNally.

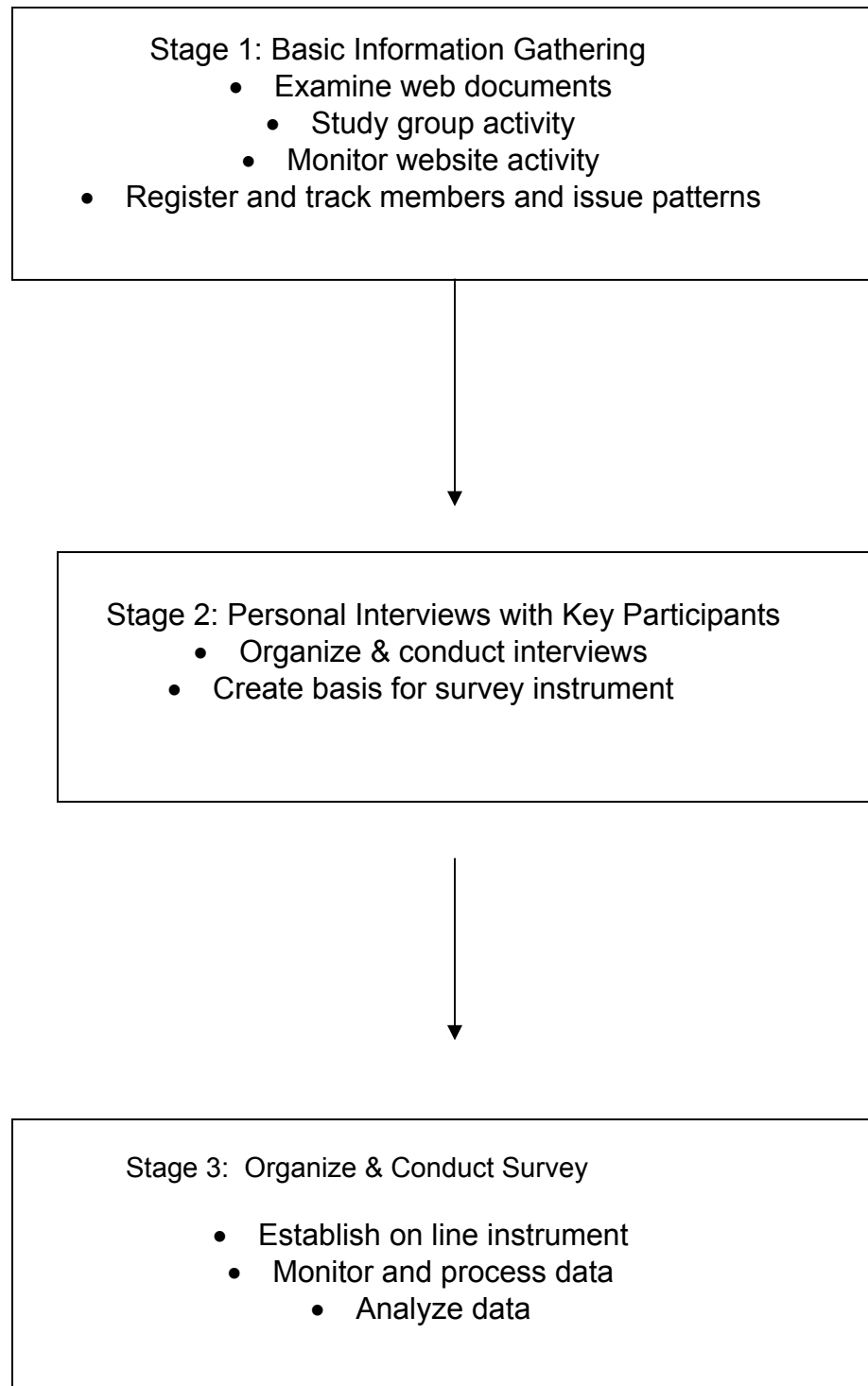
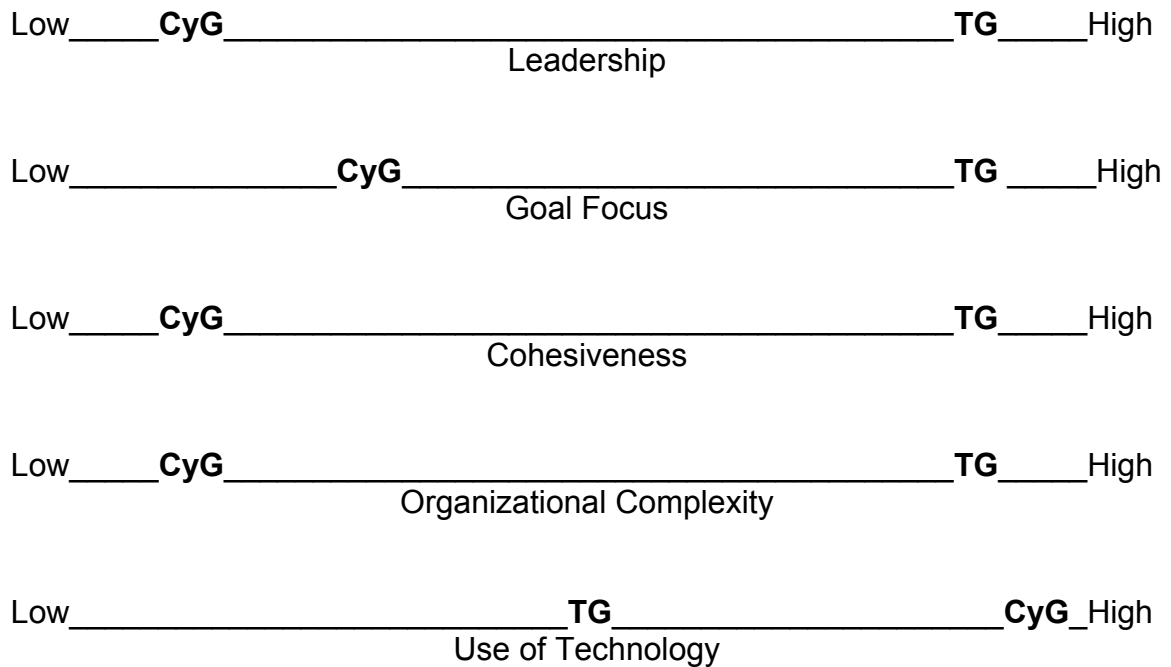


Figure 2.2 Research Strategy





**CyG** = Cybergroup

**TG** = Traditional Group

Figure 2.3. Hypothetical Array of Cybergroups and Traditional Groups

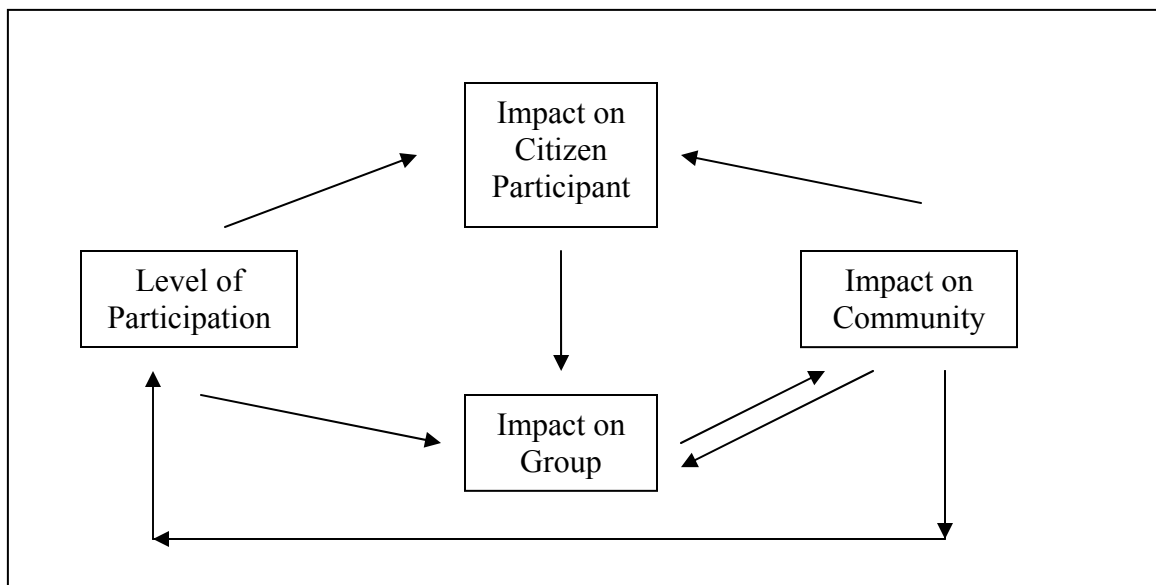


Figure 2.4. Model of Cyberspace Participation Impact

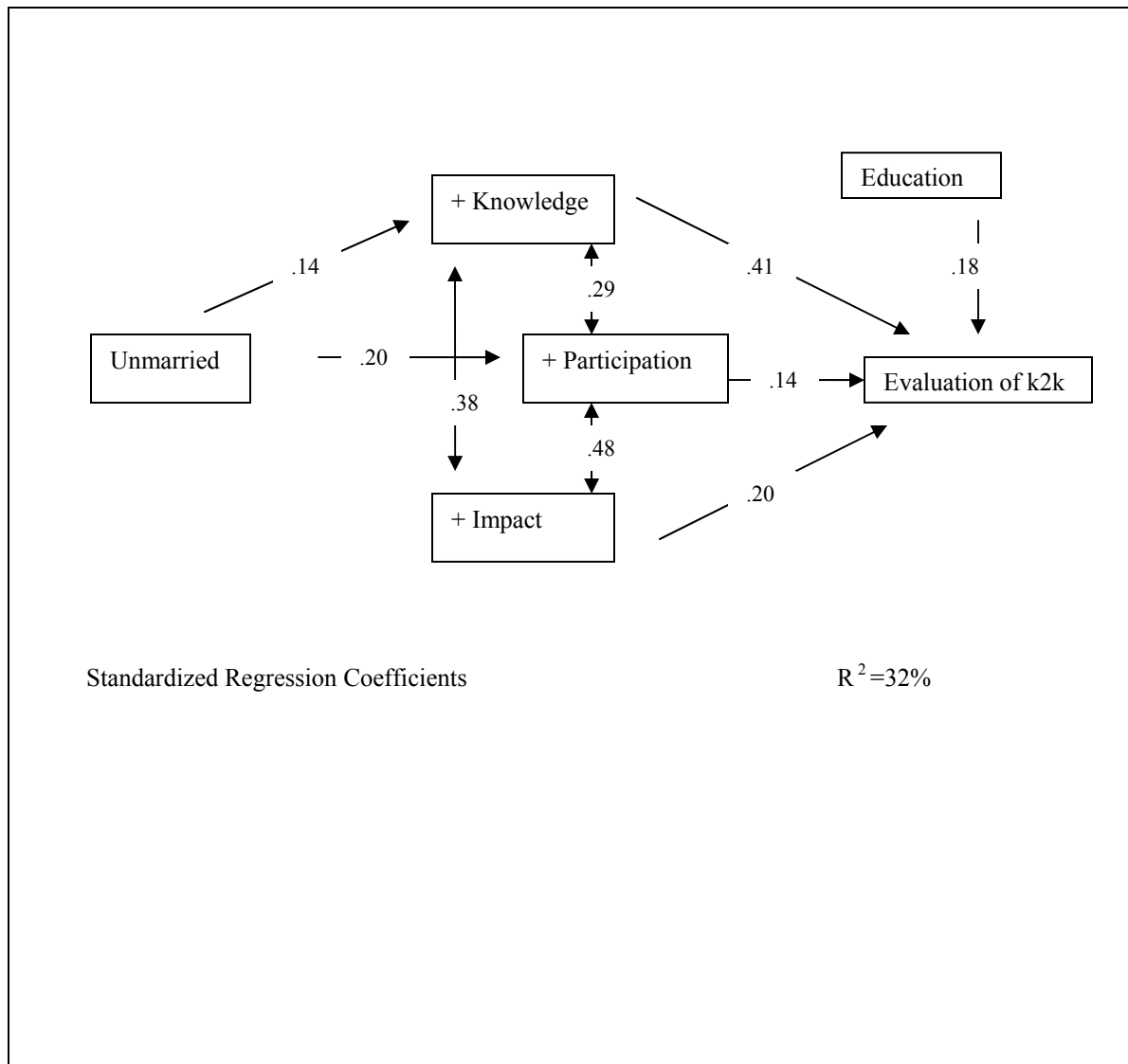


Figure 4.1. Regression Model of k2k Participation, Impact, and Evaluation

## **APPENDIX B: TABLES**

Table 2.1. Important Elements of *Traditional* Group Effectiveness

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1. Leadership
2. Funding
3. Size (recruitment, retention)
4. Goal Focus
5. Proximity to Policy Leaders
6. Incentives for Membership
7. Member Investment
8. Publicity (public awareness)
9. Cohesiveness
10. Use of Technology
11. Mobilization of Members (activism)
12. Communication
13. Staff
14. Organizational Complexity (formalized structure & procedures)
15. Stability (longevity)
16. Member Characteristics (prestige, diversity, resources, expertise, experience)

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Table 2.2 Essential Elements Of *Cybergroup* Effectiveness

- 
1. Leadership
  2. Goal Focus
  3. Cohesiveness
  4. Organizational Complexity (formalized structure & procedures)
  5. Use of Technology
-

Table 3.1 Chronology of Important k2k Events November 1999-January 2000

DATE	EVENT
November 2, 1999	<p>Buzz Goss and Cherie Piercy-Goss invite 61 friends to join k2k .</p> <p>K2k is promoted at <i>Metro Pulse's</i> Forum on Downtown Knoxville &amp; mentioned in <i>Metro Pulse's</i> "Ear to the Ground" column.</p>
December 1999	K2k subscribers join the opposition to the downtown Justice Center.
December 31, 1999-January 4 2000	Many K2k subscribers "peer edit" petition opposing Justice Center.
January 4-24, 2000	3,000 signatures are collected in 3 weeks; The k2k subscriber list grows to over 200.
January 23-24, 2000	The "Evil Binders" are distributed.
January 24, 2000	County Commission votes 19-0 to put a "hold" on the Justice Center. 30 new subscribers join k2k.

Table 4.1. K2k's Success at Meeting its Stated Purpose

Question	Excellent	Good	Fair	Poor
How would you rate k2k at meeting its stated purpose?	37%	45%	17%	2%

Table 4.2. K2k's Success at Increasing Knowledge and Participation

Question	A Great Deal	Somewhat	A Little	Not at All
Has k2k increased your knowledge of local politics?	53%	34%	8%	5%
Has k2k increased your participation in local politics?	20%	32%	18%	30%

Table 4.3: K2k's Impact on Local Politics

Question	A Great Deal	Some	A Little	None
How great an impact has k2k had on local politics?	23%	60%	18%	0%



Table 4.4. Subscriber Goals

Question	Major Reason	Minor Reason	Not a Reason
Did you subscribe to k2k because it was recommended by someone?	27%	24%	49%
Did you subscribe to k2k out of curiosity?	44%	36%	20%
Did you subscribe to k2k because you were interested in its stated purpose?	71%	23%	6%
Is this a reason you continue to subscribe?	67%	25%	8%
Did you subscribe to k2k because you wanted to increase your access to information?	67%	26%	7%
Is this a reason you continue to subscribe?	74%	18%	8%
Did you subscribe to k2k because you wanted to interact with others on the list?	18%	38%	43%
Is this a reason you continue to subscribe?	19%	28%	53%
Did you subscribe to k2k because you thought of it as entertainment?	5%	29%	66%
Is this a reason you continue to subscribe?	15%	37%	48%
Since subscribing to k2k, have you continued to subscribe because you just have not unsubscribed"?	11%	10%	79%

Table 4.5. K2k Residency

Where do you live?	Response
Inside the City of Knoxville	68%
Knox County, Outside the City	23%
Another County	6%
Another State	3%

Table 4.6. Frequency of Posted Messages and Date of Subscription

Date Subscribed	Post Frequently	Post Occasionally	Never Post
November 1999-April 2000	78%	37%	30%
May 2000-December 2000	17%	41%	33%
January 2001-August 2001	6%	22%	37%

Table 4.7. Frequency of Posting and Reading Messages

How often do you read k2k messages?	Post Frequently	Post Occasionally	Never Post
Constantly	28%	0%	1%
Several Times Daily	44%	25%	5%
Once A Day	17%	46%	15%
Several Times Weekly	11%	13%	22%
Weekly	0%	7%	10%
A Few Times a Month	0%	8%	26%
Hardly Ever	0%	0%	15%

Table 4.8. Posting Frequency and Sex

Sex	Post Frequently	Post Occasionally	Never Post
Female	22%	38%	42%
Male	78%	63%	58%

Table 4.9 Posting Frequency and Residence

Residence	Post Frequently	Post Occasionally	Never Post
Inside the City of Knoxville	94%	65%	63%
Knox County, Outside the City Limits	6%	24%	30%
Another County	0%	8%	4%
Another State	0%	3%	3%

Table 4.10. Posting Frequency and County Commission District

County Commission District	Post Frequently	Post Occasionally	Never Post
District 1	43%	4%	8%
District 2	14%	11%	4%
District 3	0%	11%	6%
District 4	14%	9%	15%
District 5	0%	13%	17%
District 6	0%	9%	19%
District 7	0%	2%	15%
District 8	7%	2%	6%
District 9	21%	38%	10%

Table 4.11. Posting Frequency and Ideology

Ideology	Post Frequently	Post Occasionally	Never Post
Liberal	41%	46%	28%
Moderate	29%	38%	58%
Conservative	29%	15%	14%

Table 4.12 Posting Frequency and Level of Education

Level of Education	Post Frequently	Post Occasionally	Never Post
Graduate Degree	28%	33%	34%
Some Graduate School	22%	21%	15%
Bachelors Degree	39%	31%	36%
Some College	6%	10%	12%
Associates Degree	6%	4%	1%
High School Diploma	0%	1%	1%

Table 4.13 Posting Frequency and Rating k2k's Success at Meeting Purpose

How would you rate k2k at meeting its stated purpose?	Post Frequently	Post Occasionally	Never Post
Excellent	61%	51%	28%
Good	28%	43%	49%
Fair	11%	6%	24%
Poor	0%	0%	0%

Table 4.14 Posting Frequency and Assessing k2k's Impact on Local Politics

What impact has k2k had on local politics?	Post Frequently	Post Occasionally	Never Post
A Great Deal	44%	22%	18%
Some Impact	50%	69%	51%
A Little Impact	6%	9%	32%
No Impact	0%	0%	0%

Table 4.15 Posting Frequency and Increased Knowledge

Has k2k increased your knowledge of local politics?	Post Frequently	Post Occasionally	Never Post
A Great Deal	89%	72%	33%
Somewhat	11%	21%	51%
A Little	0%	6%	8%
Not at All	0%	1%	7%

Table 4.16 Posting Frequency and Increased Participation

Has k2k increased your participation in local politics?	Post Frequently	Post Occasionally	Never Post
A Great Deal	72%	25%	8%
Somewhat	11%	43%	25%
A Little	6%	21%	17%
Not At All	11%	11%	50%



Table 4.17: Posting Frequency and Sharing Messages

Do you share k2k messages with non-subscribers?	Post Frequently	Post Occasionally	Never Post
No	6%	24%	56%
Yes	94%	76%	44%

Table 4.18 Age of k2k Subscribers and Knox County Survey Respondents

Age Range	k2k	Knox County
18-25	5%	13%
26-30	7%	7%
31-40	37%	18%
41-50	27%	20%
51-60	22%	16%
61-70	1%	15%
Over 70	1%	12%

Source: Private survey of adults in Knox County, conducted by phone, June 2001, William Lyons.

Table 4.19 Educational Level of k2k Subscribers and Knox County Survey Respondents

Level of Education	k2k	Knox County
Not a High School Graduate	0%	8%
High School Graduate	1%	23%
Some College	10%	26%
College Graduate	36%	25%
Graduate or Professional	52%	18%

Source: Private survey of adults in Knox County, conducted by phone, June 2001, William Lyons.

Table 4.20. Party Affiliation of k2k Subscribers and Knox County Survey Respondents

Party Affiliation	k2k	Knox County
Democrat	43%	26%
Independent	30%	38%
Republican	18%	36%

Source: Private survey of adults in Knox County, conducted by phone, June 2001, William Lyons.

Table 4.21. Political Ideology of k2k Subscribers and Knox County Survey Respondents

Political Ideology	k2k	Knox County
Liberal	40%	15%
Moderate	45%	49%
Conservative	15%	36%

Source: Private survey of adults in Knox County, conducted by phone, June 2001, William Lyons.

## **APPENDIX C: K2K ONLINE SURVEY INSTRUMENT**

## K2K SUBSCRIBER ONLINE SURVEY

1. Overall, how would you rate k2k at meeting its stated purpose of "facilitating discussion about the future of Knoxville with particular emphasis on issues related to downtown"?

Excellent  
Good  
Fair  
Poor  
Don't know/No opinion

2. Overall, has k2k increased your knowledge of local politics?

A great deal  
Somewhat  
A little  
Not at all

3. Overall, has k2k increased your participation in local politics?

A great deal  
Somewhat  
A little  
Not at all

4. Overall, how great an impact has k2k had on local politics?

A great deal of impact  
Some impact  
A little impact  
No impact  
Don't know/No opinion

5. Did you subscribe to k2k because you were interested in its stated purpose?

Major reason  
Minor reason  
Not a reason

6. Did you subscribe to k2k because it was recommended by someone?

Major reason  
Minor reason  
Not a reason

7. Did you subscribe to k2k out of curiosity about it?

Major reason

Minor reason

Not a reason

8. Did you subscribe to k2k because you wanted to increase your access to information?

Major reason

Minor reason

Not a reason

9. Did you subscribe to k2k because you wanted to interact with others on the list?

Major reason

Minor reason

Not a reason

10. Did you subscribe to k2k because you thought of it as entertainment?

Major reason

Minor reason

Not a reason

11. Did you subscribe to k2k for any reason not listed in questions 5-10 above? If so, what was your reason?

12. Since subscribing to k2k, have you continued to subscribe because you are interested in its stated purpose?

Major reason for continuing

Minor reason for continuing

Not a reason for continuing

13. Since subscribing to k2k, have you continued to subscribe in order to stay informed?

Major reason for continuing

Minor reason for continuing

Not a reason for continuing

14. Since subscribing to k2k, have you continued to subscribe because of the interaction with others on the list?

Major reason for continuing

Minor reason for continuing

Not a reason for continuing

15. Since subscribing to k2k, have you continued to do so because you find it entertaining?

Major reason for continuing  
Minor reason for continuing  
Not a reason for continuing

16. Since subscribing to k2k, have you continued to subscribe because you just have not "unsubscribed"?

Major reason for continuing  
Minor reason for continuing  
Not a reason for continuing

17. Since subscribing to k2k, is there a reason other than the ones listed in questions 12-16 above which explains why you continue to subscribe? If so, what is the reason?

18. Which of these terms would you say best describes you?

Never post a message  
Occasionally post a message  
Frequently post a message  
Have posted messages in the past but have stopped doing so at present

19. If you are not a frequent poster of messages, which one of these best describes the reason you either do not post or post only occasionally? Please check the ONE best reason.

Not applicable—I post frequently.  
I don't have time.  
My views would be unpopular with others on the list.  
It's not appropriate for someone in my position or career field.  
My supervisor would not approve.  
I want to stay informed but prefer not to participate.  
I'm just not interested.  
I might write something I'd regret later.  
Other

20. On average, about how often do you read k2k messages?

Almost constantly  
Several times daily  
About once a day  
Several times a week  
Weekly  
A few times a month  
Hardly ever  
Never

21. Have you ever shared messages on k2k with someone who is not a subscriber?

Yes

No

22. About when did you subscribe to k2k?

November 1999-April 2000

May 2000-December 2000

January 2001-present

Don't know/Not sure

23. Did the change from E-groups to Yahoo Groups create a problem for you?

No problem

Some inconvenience

A big problem

Haven't participated in any way since the change

Subscribed after the change

24. Where do you currently live?

Knox County—inside the city of Knoxville

Knox County—outside the city of Knoxville

Another county in Tennessee

Another state in the U.S.

Outside the U.S.

25. If you live in Knox County, in which County Commission District do you live?

District 1 (Bowden, Jordan)

District 2 (Collins, Tindell)

District 3 (Medley, Moody)

District 4 (Schmid, Guthe)

District 5 (Griess, Leuthold, Arms)

District 6 (Cawood, Stephens)

District 7 (Cooper, Horner)

District 8 (McMillan, Mills)

District 9 (Clark, Pinkston)

Don't know

Don't live in Knox County

26. What is your zip code?

27. Which of these comes closest to describing your political views?

Liberal

Moderate

Conservative



28. Which of these most often describes your political party preference?

Democrat  
Independent  
Republican  
Other

29. Are you currently enrolled in a college or a university?

Full time student  
Part time student  
Not a student

30. What is the highest level of education you have completed?

Some high school  
Completed high school  
Some college  
Completed college (associate's degree)  
Completed college (bachelor's degree)  
Some graduate work  
Completed a graduate degree

31. What is your sex?

Female  
Male

32. What is your age?

\_\_\_\_\_ years

33. What is your present marital status?

Single  
Married  
Separated  
Divorced  
Widowed

34. What is your race or ethnic identity?

White  
African-American  
Native American  
Asian/Pacific Islander  
Other

35. Please use the space below for any comments you care to make about k2k.

## **APPENDIX D: PRIMARY RESEARCH METHODS**

## **Primary Research Methods**

Because there are no widely accepted methods for conducting a case study of an Internet discussion forum, I offer a first-person narrative description of the primary research methods employed in the course of this study. In particular I will focus on three distinct areas of primary research: examining the messages at the discussion forum, conducting interviews with subscribers and others, and administering an online survey of subscribers.

### **Messages at the Forum**

After I became aware of k2k, I subscribed out of curiosity. After reading messages for just a short time, I became fascinated by the concept and by the unfolding series of posted messages and decided to focus my dissertation research on this relatively new phenomenon. I subscribed using my Email address and was thus listed in the member directory as “ghlyons.” For close to two years, I read every message posted at the forum without revealing to any active participant that I was studying the group. In addition, I did not post any messages. I did not want to do anything that might alter the behavior of the participants, however slightly. I took notes as I read messages, noting message numbers so that I could locate significant messages later. I made some attempt to categorize messages as I read them, but I also went beyond my classification categories. In addition, the categories themselves evolved over time.

Categories ultimately included such topics as *group identity*, *cohesion*, *leadership*, *Justice Center*, *flaming*, and the like. Underneath a category label, I listed messages by number. While reading the messages I was also reading

scholarly literature on groups, civic participation, and teledemocracy. The literature greatly informed my categorization of the messages, allowing me to flag the most relevant messages.

In addition, reading the messages allowed me to identify potential subjects for interviews, the second stage of the primary research process, and to identify likely areas for survey questions, the final stage of the primary research process..

## **Interviews**

My first choice for an interview was Steve Dupree, the current “list owner,” a contact greatly eased because I was already acquainted with him though we had not seen each other for quite some time. From Dupree I hoped to gain support for the research project as well as help in meeting other active subscribers. Within an hour of my interview with Dupree, he accompanied me to Macleod’s, a downtown pub frequented by a number of active subscribers, many of whom were present when we arrived. Having prepared informed consent forms in advance, I was able to conduct a number of interviews that evening. In addition, I established contact with others who agreed to be interviewed at a later time.

Interviews with active participants took place during the next several weeks, sometimes at Macleod’s, sometimes at other downtown locations, often accompanied by a meal or a beverage. I asked prepared questions and took notes during all interviews, but I often went beyond the list of prepared questions if interviewees seemed inclined (as many were) to offer free form commentary about k2k. Individual interview times ranged from fifteen minutes to over two

hours. Because many of the interviews with active participants took place in social or informal settings, I was also able to observe the participants in their milieu and to form impressions about the offline component of k2k for some participants.

Many interviewees or types of interviewees were deliberately selected. For example, I interviewed most of the moderators and attempted to interview many of the forum's most active participants (based on the number of messages posted.) I interviewed the forum's founders, Buzz Goss and Cherie Piercy-Goss. I also deliberately sought out those who appeared to offer minority opinions or to be in some other way "apart from" the earliest subscribers. For example, I sought out subscribers who did not know anyone else in the group prior to subscribing. I made an effort to interview early subscribers as well as those who subscribed up until the time this research was completed. At each interview, I sought names of others to be interviewed.

Active participants in k2k were not the only subjects interviewed. I also contacted public officials and media figures. Some in these groups subscribed to and participated in k2k; others subscribed but did not actively participate by posting messages. Still others neither subscribed nor participated but were aware of the group. Some in this latter group admitted to receiving forwarded messages from subscribers. In addition, I looked through the member directory in order to contact "lurkers," subscribers who had never (or rarely) posted a message. In some cases I randomly selected the person; other times, I

recognized a name or Email address from another context and contacted that person. Some of these agreed to interviews.

Most who were contacted for an interview agreed to meet with me. A few were unavailable for various reasons during the two month period when interviews were conducted in June and July 2001, and a few simply did not respond to my request. One journalist declined to be interviewed, citing lack of knowledge of k2k (other than knowledge of its existence) as the reason. In two cases, time simply ran out before an interview could be scheduled at a mutually convenient time.

During the interviews, I often mentioned the upcoming subscriber survey and urged participation when the instrument became available.

### **Online Survey**

It seemed obvious that an online survey provided the best means of reaching the largest number of k2k subscribers. In addition, I wanted the survey Emailed to every listed subscriber rather than simply made available via a link in a posted message. My intention was to survey as many subscribers as possible, ranging from active participants to those who had disengaged from the group but had not unsubscribed. My contention remains that in order to understand the dynamics of k2k requires studying not only the participants who are active at any given time but also others who are either less active (reading messages but rarely or never posting messages) or who have become totally inactive (neither reading nor posting messages).

A draft of the survey was submitted to k2k moderators who offered their critique, following which some revisions were made. For example, a question regarding income was dropped from the survey. The survey was then piloted among the moderators as well as those persons who helped with the process of putting the survey online. Following the pilot, the survey was Emailed to all subscribers.

Several moderators expressed concern about invasion of privacy if I emailed a survey to all k2k subscribers. It was eventually determined that the message announcing the survey and encouraging subscriber participation would be Emailed to subscribers from the moderators rather than from me. However, a paragraph in the message included the information that the survey was designed and being used by me for a doctoral dissertation. See Appendix E: Survey Cover Message. Also included in the message was a link to the survey. A reminder message was Emailed a couple of weeks after the original message was sent. Because code numbers were assigned to subscribers, Brent Minchey, the k2k moderator who posted the messages regarding the survey, was able to contact only those subscribers who had not responded initially.

Initially, I planned to use software available at Pellissippi State Technical Community College, WebCT software I had become aware of while teaching online courses. Eventually, this plan was changed after it was determined that some of the aspects of the software might depress the response rate. For example, respondents were required to “save” each individual response to the survey. Ultimately, a process was developed that worked very well to streamline

the steps involved in completing the survey and to protect the identities of respondents.

A.J. Wright, who had no connection to the project otherwise, created the HTML version of the survey and installed the survey at his personal website. Brent Minchey, a k2k moderator, assigned code numbers to k2k subscribers. Responses were transmitted to me (in a comma delimited file) with only code numbers attached. Thus, no one person had access to complete information—the survey, respondents' names, respondents' code numbers, and the response data.



## **APPENDIX E: SURVEY COVER MESSAGE**

All k2k subscribers:

We, the owner and moderators of k2k, ask that you take just a few minutes of your time to fill out a survey of all subscribers. The survey results, which will be shared with all subscribers, will give all of us a better understanding of who participates in k2k and why.

Because all who are currently listed as subscribers are part of the dynamics of k2k, your response is very important, regardless of whether you post messages, read messages, or do not presently participate in any way.

Data will be retrieved, analyzed, and reported in summary forms only. Your responses are completely confidential.

Gay Lyons, professor of English and political science at Pellissippi State and doctoral student in political science at UTK, designed the survey and will use the results in her dissertation "Emerging Cyberdemocracy: Five Essential Elements of Local Interest Group Power." If you have questions about the survey and how the results will be used, you may contact her at [ghlyons@yahoo.com](mailto:ghlyons@yahoo.com).

To take the survey, click on the underlined link at the end of the letter.

Since its inception in November 1999, k2k has attracted close to 700 subscribers. We thank you for taking the time to complete this short survey and look forward to sharing the results with you.

To take the survey, click on this underlined link:

[INSERT LINK]

Steve Dupree  
Brent Minchey  
Leslie Terry  
Rachel Craig  
Andie Ray  
Mark Morrison  
Mary Pom Clainborne

## VITA

Gay Henry Lyons was born in Newport, Tennessee, in 1955 and is a 1973 graduate of St. Andrew's School in Sewanee, Tennessee. She graduated from Pfeiffer College in Misenheimer, North Carolina, in December 1976 with a B.A. in English. Following graduation, she attended the National Center for Paralegal Training in Atlanta, Georgia, and received certification in the fields of real estate and probate law in May 1977. After working at a law publishing firm and at a real estate investment trust, she entered graduate school in August 1978, serving for one semester as a graduate assistant and subsequently as a teaching assistant in the English Department at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. She completed the coursework for her M.A. in English from the University of Tennessee, Knoxville in August 1980 and was awarded the M.A. degree in December 1982.

Lyons has been employed since September 1980 at Pellissippi State Technical Community College, where she currently is a tenured associate professor teaching English, Political Science, and Humanities courses. She has developed a number of innovative courses including computer-based writing courses, online and video-based distance education courses in English and Political Science, a course on "Great Crimes of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century," and a team-taught learning community which combines world literature and world history from the classical era to the Renaissance. She has served as president of the Faculty Council twice, has sponsored various student organizations, and has

been recognized for her teaching with the following awards: The Excellence in Teaching Award, the Gene Joyce Visionary Award, and the Tennessee Board of Regents Distance Education Innovations Award.

Lyons returned to graduate school as a part-time doctoral student in June 1993 and received the Doctor of Philosophy degree with a major in Political Science in May 2002.